

**TWO REALITIES OF WOMEN IN NORTHERN SOCIAL WORK  
PRIVILEGE AND OPPRESSION**

by

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study describes the experiences of five White female social workers who work with First Nations people in northern British Columbia. The concepts of culture, gender, and geography were explored by examining the participants' roles as social workers, thoughts about being a woman in northern British Columbia, and experiences working cross-culturally with First Nations people. The research was informed by the critical theory of structural social work and analysis of the interviews was done using thematic analysis. The main implications for social work practice and education include embracing strategies for effective relationship building with First Nations people, and acting as a means or prompt for social workers, educators, and students to reflect on how being oppressed and privileged impacts them both personally and professionally.

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## **Chapter One Introduction**

As a visibly White female social worker I have had experience working in several small northern First Nations communities. As a structural social worker (defined below) and as a woman who has lived in northern British Columbia (BC) since early childhood, I have had an opportunity to experience and reflect on what it is like being both a member of an oppressed group and a member of a privileged group simultaneously. It is from my own experiences that I was prompted to explore what other women in similar situations have experienced. I focused on this research in order to bring light to the unique experiences that female social workers face when working with First Nations people in northern BC.

As a structural social worker who views institutions as being the root cause of social problems, I specifically wondered how other women experienced similar situations and how they reflect on those situations. I was especially curious about how other women view their own personal problems as connected to society and also how they view the personal problems of their clients as being connected to society. I wondered if there was a difference and what that difference was. I wondered how being White impacted their work, I wondered what culture meant to them, and I also wondered how they viewed living and working in the North. I was curious about the women's thoughts and views of their own personal problems while working with highly oppressed individuals. This research set out to answer those questions by focusing on the concepts of gender, culture, and geography from the perspectives of the five social worker participants.

This research explores, what I call, "two realities." One reality is the "privileged reality" of being a White person and the other is the "oppressed reality" of being a



woman in a patriarchal society. This research portrays the experiences of the participants and gives a voice to the two “realities” experienced by the White women social workers. Through this process, I felt as though I was a weaver collecting threads from each woman with the intent of creating a tapestry. Like any tapestry, the threads create the whole and I recognize that different participants would have given me different threads to weave, in turn creating a different work of art.

### **Rationale**

As a White female social worker who has worked in northern BC with First Nations people, I have a keen interest in the experiences of other White female social workers regarding being privileged and oppressed simultaneously. To date, there has been extensive research conducted on cross-cultural social work practice, and my research adds to this literature by focusing on the experiences of the social workers. Research that focuses on northern social work practice is becoming popular, however research that focuses on northern practice with First Nations people is fairly limited, especially from the professional female’s perspective.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The research was conducted with and informed by structural social work. Structural social work stems from a conflict perspective that strongly identifies with Karl Marx’s critical theory that views conflict as being present in capitalist societies where the privileged and powerful use their status to exploit those with less power. The theoretical framework that I applied to this research is derived from conflict theory and is concerned with social transformation or “moving from a society characterized by exploitation, inequality, and oppression to one that is emancipatory and free from domination”.

(Mullaly, 1997, p 141) Overall, the conflict perspective looks to public issues as the sources of private problems (Mullaly, 1997) Structural social work is critical of institutions and practices and attempts to change the social, political, and economic forces that perpetuate the power disparities within society I applied this framework to the research by considering what Patton (2002) suggested when he said that critical research “approaches fieldwork and analysis with an explicit agenda of elucidating power, economic, and social inequalities [and] flows from a commitment to go beyond just studying society for increased understanding” ( p 548) This research embraced Mullaly’s description of structural social work, as it prompted the participants to look, personally, at the issues of oppression and privilege, while also critically analyzing the information presented by the participants Mullaly (1993) described structural social work as being more than a theory, technique, or a practice modality, “It is a way of life” (p 200)

The description of structural social work by Mullaly (1997) is the framework from which I conducted this research To expand on the nature of structural social work I will, again, quote Mullaly (1997)

Structural social work views social problems as arising from a specific societal context - liberal neo-conservative capitalism- rather than from the failings of individuals The essence of socialist ideology, radical social work, critical theory, and the conflict perspective is that inequality (1) is a natural, inherent (i e , structural) part of capitalism, (2) falls along the lines of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, age, “ability,” and geographical region, (3) excludes these groups from opportunities, meaningful participation in society, and a satisfactory quality

of life, and (4) is self-perpetuating (Mullaly, 1997, p 133)

Structural social work theory does not prioritize oppression in capitalist societies, but it includes “the role and functions of patriarchy, racism, ageism, ability/disability, colonialism of North American Native people” (Mullaly, 1997, p 147) in its analysis. Structural social work is not static, it recognizes the changing face of oppression, as the powerful and privileged in capitalist societies dominate and exploit marginalized groups. Structural social work incorporates the perspective of the subordinate positions and analyzes the structures and institutions that condone the oppressive and power-yielding behaviours and actions of the elite. Furthermore, structural social work acknowledges that social problems are built into the nucleus of society and focuses on the societal structures that oppress, rather than viewing individuals as being solely responsible for their personal problems. Structural social workers “attempt to educate service users about their own oppression and how to combat it” (Mullaly, 1997, p 171), they collaborate with individuals to assist with empowerment.

### **Research Question and Objectives of Study**

The main research question of this study is: What are the experiences of White female social workers who work with First Nations people in northern British Columbia? This was investigated by examining the experiences of the social workers, both professionally and personally, using semi-structured interviews for collecting data. This research focused on three main concepts of gender, culture, and geography. In order to identify the women’s experiences of being a White female social worker working in northern British Columbia with First Nations people, the interview protocol was divided into the following four areas: 1) demographic information, 2) the women’s professional

role as a social worker, 3) being a woman in northern British Columbia, and 4) working with First Nations people

On one level, this research provided a venue for the social workers to honestly and safely reflect on how issues of oppression and privilege impact their lives, while on another level it potentially provides the opportunity for other social workers, employers, and educators, to understand the experiences of White female social workers in northern BC. From a structural social work perspective, this research critically analyzes the implications of how social workers experience being privileged and oppressed simultaneously. The participants, as well as other social workers, educators, and students will be prompted to take notice and be aware of how oppression and privilege might affect the work of social workers in northern areas.

The research utilizes an exploratory, qualitative research design which employed the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with five participants. The research relied on standardized open-ended interview questions with wording and sequence established prior to the interview in order to increase validity while also allowing for open-ended discussion. Participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire with questions including age, years in the field, years working with First Nations clients, level of education, etc. (see Appendix 4).

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations are parameters or restrictions imposed by the researcher (Mauch & Park, 2003). The delimitations that I have imposed on this study include recruiting a) White female social workers who b) work in Northern British Columbia with c) First Nations people. A limitation of qualitative research, and of this study, is the

generalizability of the findings across time and space (Patton, 2002) This research seeks out an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences, it will not attempt to generalize the experiences to the broader population of social workers

### **Definition of Terms**

This research includes some concepts that I would like to define in order to establish a frame of reference for the terms that I will use throughout this thesis The terms include oppression, privilege, White, gender, social worker, north, culture, and First Nations people

#### **Oppression**

Oppression can occur on many different levels for different reasons but overall it stems from power and inequality Bishop (1994) suggests that the powerful and privileged individuals or groups exploit other individuals or groups This concept will be explored further in the literature review

#### **Privilege**

This research identifies and reveals attitudes and beliefs of the participants, their experiences, and the meaning that they place on working in the North with First Nations people McIntosh (1989) defines "white privilege" as "an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in on each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious" (p 10) Being a member of a privileged group while working with oppressed individuals, the social workers acknowledged their experiences and discussed how they view oppression and privilege

#### **Gender**

According to Spain (1992) "gender is the socially and culturally constructed

distinctions that accompany biological differences associated with a person's sex" (p 3)

This will also be discussed more in the literature review

### **Social worker**

Despite the perception that social workers are child protection or welfare workers, there are many sub-fields of practice that a person with a social work degree might have. Some sub-fields include mental health therapist, alcohol and drug worker, and school counsellor. This research focused on the experiences of White female social workers who work with First Nations people in northern BC, regardless of their occupational sub-field. The participants have either a Bachelor of Social Work degree or a Master of Social Work degree.

### **Culture**

The literature available on the concept of culture is quite extensive. This research explored the experiences of female social workers who work or have worked cross-culturally with First Nations people. The nature of each participant's work was varied, however a common theme is their practice being cross-cultural in nature. Fleras and Elliott (1999) provide an all-encompassing definition of culture as

A complex and socially constructed system of rules, meaning, knowledge, artifacts, and symbols that (a) guide human behaviour, (b) account for pattern regularities of thought and action, (c) provide a standard for right or wrong, good or bad, and (d) contribute to human social and physical survival. More specifically, culture can refer to the integrated lifestyle of a particular group of people, who differ from others in terms of beliefs, values, world views, and attitudes (p 432)

In her study, *Deconstructing Culture in Cultural Competence*, Wong (2003) found that “the conceptualization of culture in most writings about cultural competence fails to recognize the fluid boundaries and the political character of culture” (p 149) She pointed out that writings on cultural competence “essentialize culture as being stable and uniform” (p 151), and therefore knowable by outsiders This makes it possible for social workers to “attain cultural competence by equipping themselves with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to work with people of different cultures” (p 152) With culture being defined as a fixed concept “the ‘ability’ to work ‘effectively’ in cross-cultural situations becomes the benchmark for cultural competence” (p 152)

Wong (2003) identified that there is a hierarchy between the dominant culture and minority cultures that is reinforced when “people of the dominant culture are the all-knowing helpers whereas people of minority culture are in need of help” (p 153) “Colonial and racial power relations are culturalized in the discourse of cultural competence” (p 149) The colonial and racial power relations that Wong et al suggested are central to the discourse of cultural competence stem from the “desire for knowledge, certainty, and control among helping professionals” (p 152) Clients are viewed as having a fixed reality Wong stated that “the discourse of culture may trap us into perpetuating oppression and inequity” (p 161) and suggested that “difference” is identified as

the opposite of what is valued by the dominant White society if ethnic minority cultures are homogenized as collectivist or bound by familial or cultural values, mainstream White Canadian culture is individualist and autonomous, if the former are marked by respect for authority, White Canadian culture is characterized by

egalitarianism and independence, if non-Western cultures are traditional, Western culture is modern (Wong, 2003, p 161)

For the purpose of this research the definition of culture is a blend of many sources and was not fully defined until the interviews had taken place. This research allowed the social workers to define what culture means to them and how they experience working cross-culturally. Overall, this research embraces Wong's (2003) description of culture that acknowledges that culture is not a fixed concept, but is "contextual, improvisational, and political" (p 161)

### **White**

Even though the term "race" is socially constructed and "provides a basis for judging the worth of an individual or group" (Fleras & Elliot, 1999, p 39), I will be using the term "White" to describe the participants. White people are commonly thought of as belonging exclusively to the White racial group regardless of the continental source (e.g., Europe, Asia) or ancestry (Helms, 1996, p 189). Fleras and Elliot (1999) suggested that there is no genetic basis or scientific validity for the term "race". This research will recognize White female social workers as being members of a group who are perceived as being different than their clients based on the participants identifying themselves as being "White". In this research the term "White" is not used to suggest that being White means the same thing to each person who identifies as being White, just as it is not suggested that all people who identify as being First Nations are the same. It is beyond the scope of this research to adequately explore what it means to be White or what it means to be First Nations.



### **First Nations people**

For this study, the term First Nation refers to individuals commonly known as Indians living in northern British Columbia. I recognize that not all people embrace the term First Nation and that some people may view this term as being offensive, however I use the term First Nation unless directly quoting another source. I hope that the term First Nation is viewed in the respectful spirit that it is intended.

I make special note that although this research only briefly mentions historical and current oppression that First Nations people have experienced in Canada, it is important to recognize how First Nations people have been forever impacted by the many systemic attempts to forcibly assimilate them into Eurocentric ways of life. Assimilation strategies were, and are still, carried out by policies and laws such as the Indian Act. The Indian Act has permeated through the rights of First Nations people since its creation in 1876. Since that time many areas of life for First Nations people have been impacted including, but not limited to: traditional activities, rights to land ownership, the right to vote, liquor use, and forcible schooling. Historically the Residential Schools were notorious for forcibly removing children from their parents' care and placing them in church run schools. The schools are known for neglect, physical, emotional, and sexual abuses. The oppression of First Nations people carries a very different significance than the oppression of other marginalized groups in Canada by the implementation and enforcement of legal entities used with intent to systematically assimilate First Nations people into Eurocentric ways of life.

### **North**

This research takes place in northern British Columbia (BC) which is defined as it

is by the Northern Health Authority, which covers an area of nearly 600,000 square kilometres and has 54 First Nations Bands within its boundaries (Northern Health Authority, 2008, p 4) This area encompasses roughly two-thirds of the province's northern landmass with an east-west intersect south of Quesnel on Highway 97 The concept of north will be explored further in the literature review

### **Organization of Thesis**

This thesis is organized into five chapters Chapter one introduces the research topic and related concepts used throughout this document Chapter two provides a review of the relevant literature related to the research topic The literature review examines the topics of gender, social work practice, cross-cultural practice, northern practice, and practice with First Nations people Chapter three outlines thematic analysis as the methodology of this research and also discusses the research procedures used in this study Chapter four provides a detailed account of the six themes and multiple sub themes that emerged from the analysis of the five interviews conducted Finally, Chapter five provides a discussion of the research topic and identifies areas for further consideration

## **Chapter Two Literature Review**

This chapter provides a selective review of the concepts relevant to this research. The general literature on this research topic is quite extensive, as it covers a wide range of concepts including gender, social work practice, cross-cultural practice, northern practice, practice with First Nations people, structural social work practice, and anti-oppressive social work practice. I start by reviewing structural social work and the concepts of oppression and privilege, and then I move on to explore the concept of gender and gender roles. After that I examine social work practice including how culture is defined, cross-cultural practice, and practice with First Nations people. I then conclude the literature review with northern social work practice.

### **Structural Social Work**

The University of Northern British Columbia's (UNBC) School of Social Work is one of only nine Canadian Schools of Social Work that have adopted a structural approach to their education (Bellefeuille & Hemingway, 2006). Structural social work broadens perspectives of individual and social problems by providing a framework to understand how structures oppress people who belong to certain groups defined by race, class, gender, ability, age, and sexual orientation. The UNBC School of Social Work's Bachelor of Social Work Degree course content focuses on social work in "northern and remote areas, First Nations, women and the human services, and community practice and research" (University of Northern British Columbia, 2010, p. 1). There is also a central focus on "analysis of class, gender and race relations" (p. 1).

Like any theory or approach there are criticisms of the structural approach. Fook (2002) points out some issues regarding how structural theory has been enacted and

taught due to status differentials between men and women, the gendered nature of value differences between micro and macro work, and the devaluing of practice against theory I recognize her criticisms however I attended UNBC's School of Social Work, a structural school, and note the importance of acknowledging that my preference, epistemologically, is from the critical approach of structural social work

As stated above, Mullaly (1993) states that structural social work views social problems as "arising from a specific societal context – liberal/neo-conservative capitalism – rather than from the failings of individuals" (p 124) He further suggests that structural social work's goal is twofold The first part is to "alleviate the negative effects on people of an exploitative and alienating social order", and the next part is "to transform the conditions and social structures that cause these negative effects" (p 124-125) Mullaly describes the goal as providing immediate relief at one level, the micro level, while also addressing longer-term change at the macro level

Mullaly (1993) notes that structural social work addresses change at three tiers including the individual, the organizational, and the societal levels At the individual level, it is important to educate individuals by focusing on "raising people's awareness of how capitalist society shapes, limits, and dominates their experiences, thus alienating them from social structures, from each other, and from their true selves" (Mullaly, 1993, p 154) At the organizational level, structural social work attempts to transform institutions and organizations in order to minimize or eliminate oppressive policies and decision-making practices This organizational transformation happens on behalf of both services users and workers, and it includes action such as union activity, peer supervision, developing consultative relationships between workers and supervisors, and

“implement[ing] more democratic means of sharing decisions, responsibilities, and information” (Mullaly, 1993, p 178) At the organizational level, there is also a focus on “confront[ing] all agency policies and practices that oppress or negatively affect service users in other ways” (Mullaly, 1993, p 178) At the societal level, one of the goals of structural social work is “to transform our present patriarchal, liberal-capitalist society to one based on a different set of values and social arrangements” (Mullaly, 1993, p 184-185) Mullaly suggests that this can be done in a variety ways including social action, forming coalitions, alliances, or new groups or organizations that are “committed to changing the destructive social relationships and operating principles of our present society” (p 185)

The above account provides an overview of the goals of structural social work and my own personal reason for applying this theory to my research This research was guided by the theory of structural social work from the original idea, to the formulation of questions, to the analysis of the data, and finally to the writing Even though I choose to apply this structural social work approach to this research I recognize that not all personal problems necessarily stem from capitalism For example, interpersonal relationships, grief, mental illness, and physical illnesses may transcend cultural, social, gender, and economic constructs Someone who experiences grief does not typically experience it because they are a member of an oppressed group Grief like many other personal and interpersonal problems is present in all societies and does not originate from oppression and capitalism

## **Oppression**

Considering that “most structural social work practice is carried out with, or on

behalf of, oppressed people” (Mullaly, 2007, p 252) it is important to establish what oppression is. Mullaly explains that oppression is group-based and relational where one group “occupies a position of power, influence, and privilege that are used to maintain their position, often at the expense of the subordinate group(s)” (p 253), this occurs in people’s every day relations with one another. Domination and oppression are relational, not static, because they exist and change between individuals, social groups, and classes, or between entire societies (Mullaly, 2007).

### **Privilege**

Privilege is a very complex matter that gives special entitlement to certain individuals within society. For the purpose of this research I will examine how being White is a privilege and gives people automatic power that is often not recognized or acknowledged in society (Fleras & Elliot, 1999, p 32). Privilege extends further than being White, as it is very complicated, however being White is the construct which extends privilege to every other area of life such as access to health care, employment opportunities, entertainment choices, and access to education. Fleras and Elliot (1999) say, “Whiteness is everything because it is perceived by whites as nothing” (p 34). Bishop (2005) furthers the notion of the silent privilege because “privilege is invisible” (p 67) and is most easily seen by those who do not have it, while oppression is most clearly seen by those who experience it (p 174). “The privileges associated with whiteness are neither openly articulated nor logically deserved, but assumed and universalized as the norm and beyond definition, scrutiny, or criticism” (Fleras & Elliot, 1999, p 32).

Since privilege is often unacknowledged, people who are privileged need to

recognize their privilege and move towards changing the structures that condone and perpetuate the oppression of marginalized people Bishop (1994) suggests that people who are members of a privileged group that recognize that they have unearned privileges who work towards the elimination of oppression are “allies” She suggests that allies can be “a white person who works to end racism, or a man who works to end sexism” (p 126) Like Bishop, I am a woman and a lesbian, also like Bishop, and other women who self-identify as not being heterosexual, I experience oppression from the institutions and structures in society and from the attitudes of the dominant culture Like Bishop, “I am also white, Anglophone, employed, able-bodied, hearing, born a Canadian citizen, ‘normal’ looking and not over-weight These attributes place me on the privileged side of the line” (Bishop, 1994, p 5) It was contemplating these two realities of being oppressed and privileged, while working with a different group of oppressed individuals, that my research topic was realized

McIntosh’s (1989) metaphor of the invisible knapsack is considered a classic work which examines the unspoken and unrecognized privileges that White people have by virtue of being White She suggested that White privilege is “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, code books, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks” (p 31) McIntosh describes White privilege as being comparable to the often unrecognized privilege that men have in patriarchal societies My research sets out to examine the participants’ contextual views of being both a member of an oppressed group (women) a member of a privileged group (White) while working with another oppressed group (First Nations people)

## Gender

Women's experiences are traditionally associated with socially constructed gender roles that place them in the private world "Gendered ideology continues to shape women's everyday lives, as well as social expectations about women's experiences and behavior" (Kemp, 2001, p 15) Constructs of gender vary considerably in a global sense as well as regionally and locally Femininity and masculinity are constructed in places such as the home, workplace, and community (Spain, 1992) This discussion conceptualizes sex and gender very differently Sex refers to biological factors of male and female, and gender refers to an "array of socially determined roles, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes on a differential basis" (Leipert & Reutter, 2005, p 242) This array of gender roles is much more complicated than polarized constructs of masculine and feminine as historically correlated to being male or female, however the parameters of this research do not allow for a full examination of the vast array of gender roles

Sex-typed roles that have been ascribed to women by dominant cultures include responsibilities related to childrearing, care-giving, and domestic affairs Patriarchal societies have traditionally viewed females as being subordinate and males as being dominant The characteristics of "maleness" and the masculine gender have been valued more in the dominant society and viewed as more important and desirable qualities Brym (1998) described a study by Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, and Rosenkrantz (1972) that asked respondents to describe traits that characterized average men and women "Men were described as very aggressive, very independent, very active, very competitive, very logical, able to make decisions easily, and almost always acting as



leaders” (Brym, 1998, p 188) Women were described as “not at all aggressive, not at all independent, very emotional, very passive, not at all competitive, very illogical, able to make decision only with difficulty, and almost never acting as leaders” (Brym, 1998, p 188) Mackie (1980) also found similar polarization of gender stereotypes

The attributes associated with the masculine gender have given males more access to knowledge and power, thus have limited the roles that females have played in dominant patriarchal societies Scourfield (2006) suggests that even today, “there is a social hierarchy of gendered practices, and men still have disproportionate access to social power” (p 666) The power and authority of males over females permeates through society and often results in gendered terrains where males and females have very different access to certain spaces, this segregation has perpetuated male dominance Spain (1992) suggests that “gendered spaces separate women from knowledge used by men to produce and reproduce power and privilege” (p 3)

### **Women and space**

“The ways that environments actively construct women’s identities must be considered when examining women’s experiences in everyday environments” (Kemp, 2001, p 19) Since spatial and social relations are inseparable and gender is socially and culturally constructed, one must examine how space impacts the lives of women in order to gain understanding into the experiences that women have in northern, rural, and remote settings Femininity and masculinity are constructed in places such as home, workplace, and community (Spain, 1992), and spatial segregation of men and women occurs in all of these domains “Spatial segregation is one of the mechanisms by which a group with greater power can maintain its advantage over a group with less power By

controlling access to knowledge and resources through the control of space, the dominant group's ability to retain and reinforce its position is enhanced" (Spain, 1992, p 15-16) Spain continued to suggest that spatial boundaries contribute to the unequal status of women

Men and women have, in the past, and present contributed to spatial segregation and stratification based on gender, and "both sexes subscribe to the spatial arrangements that reinforce differential access to knowledge, resources, and power" (Spain, 1992, p 18) Spain explained that men contribute "because it serves their interests, and women because they may perceive no alternative" (p 18) Women's participation in spatial segregation also includes ideological pressures, religious reasons, and lack of choice (Spain, 1992) It is important to recognize that women have unique "accounts of their environmental experiences" (Kemp, 2001, p 19), and environments cannot be "understood in isolation from the personal and cultural experiences of the people within it or the larger sociopolitical arrangements that shape and are shaped by this everyday experience" (p 13)

Historically women have been spatially segregated from many institutions For example, women were originally forbidden to attend college, thus restricting their access to certain types of knowledge Another place that women were forbidden to enter was labour unions, this was to prevent women from acquiring information and technical skills necessary to succeed in blue-collar jobs (Spain, 1992) "Information control is thus a way to control prestige, power, and wealth" (p 21) and maintain gender stratification "Gendered spaces themselves shape, and are shaped by, daily activities Once in place, they become taken for granted, unexamined, and seemingly immutable" (p 28) In the

dominant society, “status often depends on the power to control some form of knowledge, whether it is scientific, religious, entrepreneurial, political, or psychological” (p 29) With women having less access to institutions that perpetuate forms of power, they remain subordinate to men

The institution of Western education was initially for men only, but when women were allowed to attend, they were often placed in separate classrooms (Spain, 1992) This illustrates how knowledge enhanced men’s status as long as women were not granted access Spain noted that “education is the critical link between private and public status for women” (p 168) Access to the public world allowed women to be integrated into the labour force, another institution that segregates based on gender When women did enter the workforce there were few options and the options available continued to keep women spatially segregated from men Acceptable work for women included household production, domestic services, and teaching, all of which are positions that were historically viewed as an extension of women’s roles in the home These positions effectively “separated women from access to the newly emerging technology fueling industrialization” (Spain, 1992, p 197) and sexually segregated women to a patriarchal model of work Eventually women were allowed jobs that both men and women performed as factory and clerical workers Limited opportunities initially prevented women from gaining property rights and the vote (Spain, 1992), both of which women eventually gained In BC women received the vote in 1917

With every advance in industrialism, women were left behind while men moved ahead This constantly restricted the amount of knowledge, power, and wealth that women could achieve This does not mean that males did not face adversity based on

constructs of race and class, but it does demonstrate that women were automatically limited in many ways based on their biological sex and the gender roles attributed to being female, whereas males were given opportunities based on being born a male. Women of colour and/or of a lower socio-economic class would face many more challenges, as they are farthest from being a White, upper class, man that dominant societies hold in high esteem.

The notion that space is segregated by gender prompted me to ask the participants in this study, White female social workers, what it is like working in a profession that has mostly women working in it. I wanted to explore what the women's perspectives were on the topic and see if there were common thoughts, beliefs, or experiences regarding their role in a sex-typed profession.

### **The North and gender roles**

All economies of BC's North, both rural and urban, are dominated by resource-based industries. These industries "have a masculine and transient nature, which is disadvantageous for women in general because the focal point of such communities is men's work, hence men's experience" (Anderson, Healy, Herringer, Isaac, & Perry, 2001, p. 6). The North is "more likely to be dominated by certain proscribed regional norms, values, and expectations" (Keller & Murray, 1982, p. 16). Women have historically had little power in the White person's North, as it is "constrained by a very strong conservative ideology which as well as perpetuating the domestic role maintains the status quo and works against any united political action by women" (Little, 1986, p. 7). The dominant Eurocentric society's ideology consists of values, ideas, beliefs, and social norms that are considered traditional, conservative, and fundamental. This type of

ideology typically does not value women outside the traditional roles of caretaking and domestic affairs

Leipert and Reutter (2005) suggest that “because traditional roles of wife and mother are favoured in small communities, education and career opportunities for women are limited” (p 242) and gender roles in a northern context are connected to history, physical, socio-cultural, and political environments. When they discussed the historical location of the North, Leipert and Reutter suggested that because of “severe climate, social isolation and relative absence of material resources, indigenous peoples and early settlers needed to be self-reliant, hard working, and able to live off the land. These attributes survive in the North today” (p 244). Other important historical elements include “a heritage of control of the North by outsiders, impoverishment of indigenous populations, emphasis on rapid, profit-oriented resource development and exploitation, and limited ability of local northern residents to control their destinies” (Leipert & Reutter, 2005, p 244).

Leipert and Reutter (2005) suggest that undervaluing of women in the North is demonstrated in the undervaluing of women's roles and perspectives and includes favouring men's values, interests, behaviours, and traditionally oppressive roles for women. “Undervaluing of women may also result from the nature of employment in northern communities. Resource-based industries tend to be male-oriented and prefer male employees, few of the pulp mills, for example, employ female[s]” (p 247). Women who do have jobs work in positions that “tend to be in low status, traditional and low paying sectors. Gender segregation at work can accentuate and sustain gender segregation and the undervaluing of women at home and in society at large” (p 247).

The findings of Leipert and Reutter's (2005) research that explored the importance of geography and gender on the health of women in BC's north identified that the marginalization of northern women falls into four categories: isolation, limited options, limited power, and being silenced. Northern women are isolated by physical, social, and political environments (Leipert & Reutter, 2005). Isolation was also considered when there is an outsider, or a person "who lives in the community but is not truly part of the community. Another restriction for women in the North is the lack of services, such as daycares or drop-in centres, etc. that "constrained women's abilities to obtain resources that could support them in employment, personal situations and family relationships" (p. 249).

Leipert and Reutter's (2005) study demonstrates that there is a perception that the North is dominated by men and also demonstrates that women have additional challenges that they may not be present in other geographical areas. Gill (1990) agrees that women in isolated resource-based communities face challenges, but she comes to a different conclusion about women's perceptions about the attributes of the community that they live in. She suggests that there has been a misleading body of literature that is not based on empirical data that has contributed to the exaggeration of "negative impressions of the quality of life in modern resource towns" (p. 348).

Gill (1990) examined how females in a planned resource-based community evaluated their environment. She then compared the results with males' results in the same community. The results suggest that there are problems that women face regarding living and/or working in an isolated resource-based community which are typically viewed as being male-dominated. However, the results also revealed that males and

females have similar cognitive structuring of community attributes including children's education, social environment, economic security/work stability, and children's environment. Considering Gill's conclusions, it is important to note that the community where this research took place was a planned community, built near a newly operating coal mine. One can surmise that this planned community does not have the same complex web of historical social, political, and cultural factors that other northern remote/isolated resource based communities face. Gill points out that more research is needed to understand the complexities of specific localities.

Considering the above discourse on the roles of women in the North, I was prompted to include questions in this research that explore the participants' experiences of being not only a woman in the North, but a professional woman. I was curious about whether they viewed themselves as having challenges because they are women. And finally, I was curious about whether or not the women experienced isolation, especially if they were not originally from the North.

### **Social Work Practice**

Barker (2003) notes that the profession of social work was "founded on humanitarian and egalitarian ideals" (p. 203), and has traditionally focused on empowering people who were oppressed, vulnerable, or poor. The profession's grounding and ethical obligations enable it "to make a difference in the lives of the disadvantaged and marginalized citizens" (p. 205). Social work is a value-based profession that is committed "to a particular set of values including respect for worth and dignity of every person, the client's right to self-determination, confidentiality, advocacy and social action that promotes social justice" (Social Policy, 2007, p. 1). The Canadian

Association of Social Workers summarized these values as humanitarianism, egalitarian ideals, self-determination, mutual respect, and dignity of every person, privacy, human rights, fair and non-judgmental, co-operation (Social Policy, 2007, p 1) Values in social work are important, especially due to the sensitive nature of the work issues

### **Gender and the social work profession**

“The evolutionary ideology of divergent abilities between men and women helped establish social work as an occupation particularly suited to women” (Daly, 1995, p 11) Since women’s experiences are influenced by socially constructed gender roles, it is necessary to understand how the profession of social work “operates within a distinctly gendered terrain in which the majority of clients, workers, volunteers, and activists are female and the social problems in which we are collectively engaged are highly gendered” (Baines, 2003, p 43) The social work profession is sex-typed Sex-role stereotyping involves publicly shared beliefs about appropriate characteristics for males and females (Harris & Lucas, 1975) It is not surprising that occupations are often sex-typed, this occurs when a large majority of people are of one sex and when there is an expectation that this is as it should be Historically, social work has been viewed “as an extension of their [women’s] traditional responsibility for the domestic realm” (Walkowitz, 2005, p 330) Daly (1995) noted that female social workers “conformed to a secular interpretation of the cult of true womanhood domestic, benevolent, self-sacrificing and exhibiting superior morality” (p 11)

Female social workers work in many institutions such as “social services agencies, hospitals, schools, mental health centers, community programs” (Weick, 2000, p 395), even though the dominant culture has historically not recognized women’s work



as valuable Weick's assessment was that "women in general and social workers in particular have difficulty believing that what they do is important" (p 369) This seems appropriate, as social workers and females are not typically valued due to the link of the profession to the gender role that women are natural helpers Society seems to question how a "natural" skill can have value in a capitalist society

As of May, 2005 women held 79% of the social work positions in British Columbia and women held 47% of the overall jobs in British Columbia (BC Works, 2008, p 26) This comparison reflects a higher proportion of women working as social workers than in most job categories The national percentage of social workers who are females is also very high (76%) (Schmidt, Westhues, Lafrance, & Knowles, 2000) Even though women make up the majority of social workers, "men occupy a disproportionate share of high-level positions" (Daly, 1995, p 12) Men hold positions "in intellectual, analytical, policy-making and administrative areas of the profession, women are concentrated in the nurturing, affective, one-to-one practice areas" (Daly, 1995, p 12) This demonstrates that social work, as a profession, validates and perpetuates the gender-role stereo-types of men and women, with men being dominant and women being subordinate In short, the profession of social work has separated social work into *spheres for men and spheres for women thus reinforcing the dominant culture's assigned values of gender norms*

This literature consistently describes women's work as historically being undervalued and as an extension of their natural responsibilities With this in mind my research incorporated the question of how the participants see themselves as being valued as a social worker and also explored why the women do the work that they do I was also

curious about whether or not the women see social work as “women’s work”

### **Northern social work practice**

Ginsberg’s (1993) *Social Work in Rural Communities* is an American publication that speaks of rural people and used the terms “rural” and “nonmetropolitan” interchangeably. The characteristics that he listed for rural areas are transferable to northern British Columbia. Ginsberg suggested that rural (northern) areas have special characteristics including lack of services and recreation, employment centres around one or two industries, government is run by local structures, ethnic groups are highly visible, religion is important, there is a smaller scale of living (people know each other well).

In Canada, Zapf (1985, 1993, 1999) was the first to point out that northern social work practice is different than rural social work practice. Delaney (1995) recognized distinctive features of remote communities such as distance, environmental stresses, vast uninhabited areas, lack of economic opportunities, overlapping political and administrative jurisdictions, inability of residents to influence politics due to geography, and transient populations.

The definition of “the North” has shifted throughout history (Schmidt, 2000) and is constructed differently by different people. Delaney (1995) suggests that the North is about people, not only geography. Coates and Morrison (1992) said that Canada has two Norths: the first being located geographically in the Canadian territories and the second is the provincial North in all but the Maritime Provinces. “Hamelin used the polar ice index to define five regions in Canada: Extreme North, Far North and Middle North, while Base or Southern Canada is comprised of the Near North and the Ecumene” (Delaney, 1995, p. 7).

The literature on Canadian northern social work practice has been examined since the 1970s. Since that time scholars such as Collier (2006), Delaney (1995), Zapf (1985, 1993, 1999), and Schmidt (2000, 2008) have broadened the knowledge of social work practice in northern Canada. The distinct differences between the early works of rural social work practice and the new literature on northern social work practice illustrate how social workers must approach northern practice in a much different way. Special consideration must be given to the difference in views of the North between First Nations people who have lived in the same “northern” location since time immemorial and the European settlers who “tended to see the North as something wild that should be tamed and harnessed to generate economic activity and wealth” (Schmidt, 2000, p. 338). These contrasting views of what “the North” is, are relevant to social workers who may travel to the North to work, but do not view it as home. Another consideration of social workers and their views of the North are those who plan to stay for a short time in order to gain experience, these people may view the North as a place to use as a stepping stone for a future job.

Sellick and Delaney (1996) described northern social work practice as being “guided by the principles of mutuality, empowerment and salient need fulfillment, and framed within the principles supporting constructivism and collaborative partnerships” (p. 39). They also identified that northern social workers must have a continual willingness to learn. They identified four points that are important for social workers to understand contextual patterns in northern communities as being: attitude of humility and ‘not knowing’, a willingness to listen, a willingness to be transformed, not just eagerness to transform, and an awareness that one’s immersion in a northern community is

inescapably a political act which leaves that community unavoidably changed (Sellick & Delaney, 1996) These views seem to assume that the social worker is an “outsider” and do not consider that the social worker might actually be from the North

Personality attributes are also seen as important in rural and remote social work practice instead of value only being placed on professional skills, education, and knowledge Schmidt (2000) states, “social work in northern environments is characterized by high staff turnover and a poor fit between urban educated social workers and northern communities and clients” (p 342) When considering the practice of northern social workers, where the social worker is originally from, and where they were trained, it is important to note Zapf’s (1999) statement of values

Social workers trained and comfortable within that southern cultural milieu might be expected to encounter difficulties when moving to a remote northern community to practice in the context of different world views, values and traditions (p 350)

The difference of northern practice is that one must incorporate all the values and standards of practice of the profession while in “a fish bowl where each and every aspect of their behaviour is observed, recorded and measured by a critical community” (Schmidt, 2000, p 344)

“There is a misconception in the minds of many that ‘rural’ is a geographic space where life is simple, quiet, and less strife-laden than life in urbanized areas” (Mackie, 2007, p 115) This idealistic thinking “discounts the array of social problems that exist in rural regions” (p 115) Collier (2006) notes that people’s “personal problems remain isolated with the individual to a far greater extent than is true of city dwellers” (p 93)

He suggests that rural social workers must be willing to adapt to change that occurs from the industrial society by utilizing techniques from a generalist perspective (p 99)

Saltman, Gumpert, Allen-Kelly, and Zubrzycki (2004) conducted a comparison of rural social work practice in the United States and Australia and their findings suggested that a “shared rural culture may exist across developed countries” (p 528) Their definition was that culture “is not only related to ethnicity and race but also to context and place” (p 528) Saltman et al revealed that the participants “included cultural information (the knowledge, information and beliefs that members of a community share)” (p 525) into their practice They continued to explain that important specific cultural norms of rural life included “slower pace of life, the importance of informal communication, suspicion of outsiders, suspicion of government, and pride in local history” (p 526)

The literature of northern social work practice tends to assume that the social worker is an outsider Perhaps this is because historically social workers were not trained in the North, and southern social work education did not recognize or incorporate curriculum addressing the unique needs of the North There is also a gap in the social work literature that does not recognize the unique experiences of female social workers practicing in the North My research addresses these issues while also exploring what the social workers’ definition of culture is and the significance of culture in the work that they do

### **The Social Work Discourse of Culture**

In order to understand what cross-cultural social work practice is one must first understand how culture is defined The social work profession has been critiqued for not

adequately defining the concept of culture in its discourse Park's (2005) critical discourse analysis of the concept of culture in contemporary social work discourse argued that "despite the ubiquity of its usage, however, neither the meaning nor the significance of the concept of culture has been sufficiently examined in social work" (p 5) Park identified that culture is a "taken-for-granted term", and stated that "culture" is a term used when referring to people who are different than the mainstream dominant society (p 5) She said that the profession of social work has embraced the notion of "culture" as people who are a member of a group with minority status, and that the social work profession constructs "culture" as a "deficit marker for subjected populations which reinforces the subjugating paradigm from which it is fashioned" (p 33) Overall, the social work discourse that Park examined tended not to define culture, but attempted to describe how "culture" develops (p 16) or what culture does (p 17)

Some social work discourse (Saltman, Gumpert, Allen-Kelly, & Zubrzycki, 2004, Yan, 2005) offers definitions of the term "culture" that were based on descriptions given by social workers who participated in their research study Perhaps there has historically been little social work discourse that defines the term "culture" because it is one of the most difficult concepts in the social sciences (Yan, 2005, p 10), "hence there is no single definition of the concept of culture, particularly in the cross-cultural social work literature" (p 10) Yan's empirical study, that explored 30 front-line social workers' interactions with their own culture while working with clients from a different culture, found that the participants suggested that culture encompasses "ways of life, ways of coping, beliefs, values, norms, practice, rites, customs and traditions, religion, expectations of others, language, and food and dress" (p 10) Another way of defining

culture was identified by Saleebey (1994) who defined culture as “the means by which we receive, organize, rationalize, and understand our particular experiences in the world” (p 352), and that the learning of culture occurs early and is frequently mistaken for “something innate and immutable” (p 352) If culture is mistaken as innate, perhaps this contributes to the lack of literature on the concept and contributes to the notion that culture is often only associated with visible difference such as race and ethnicity as Park (2005) suggested, nonetheless there are still several ways social workers have defined the term “culture”

For Gray (2005), who examined international social work practice, culture “is a flexible entity, moulded and shaped by *inter alia* history, politics, religion, social change and economic systems” (p 237) She suggested that new cultures can emerge, as culture is not fixed (p 237) Clark (2003) borrowed a definition of culture from Petersen (1997) and used the term to include “ethnographic variables (e g , ethnicity, nationality, language, religion), demographic variables (e g , age, sex, place of residence), status variables (e g , social, educational, economic, and affiliations (formal, informal)” (Clark, 2003, p 249) The above examples briefly touch on some of the social work discourse that defines culture Again, this research embraces Wong et al ’s (2003) description of culture that acknowledges that culture is not a fixed concept, but it is “contextual, improvisational, and political” (p 161), and explores the participants’ definition and views on culture

### **Cross-cultural practice with First Nations people**

Considering that the literature of cross-cultural practice in the North with First Nations people is fairly limited and the likelihood of a social worker working with a First

Nations client in a northern context is inevitable (Borg, Brownlee & Delaney, 1995, p 116), it is important to examine the literature that connects the concepts of cross-cultural practice in the North. Berman (2006) identifies some of the barriers to providing mental health services to “indigenous people” in remote areas of Alaska. These two barriers included distance (isolation) and cultural incompatibility. Berman suggests that the first challenge, distance, is faced by both service providers and those receiving service. The conventional strategy of services being based out of a central location where services are concentrated and disseminated is a poor fit with the needs of northern people. People cannot travel to obtain service therefore this typically involves workers periodically traveling to northern and remote locations for a few days at a time to provide direct services. The second challenge that Berman identifies is cultural incompatibilities such as communication differences (e.g., little eye contact for indigenous people) and different views on helping (indigenous views are based on familial and community connections vs professional help) as being two worlds that can clash in the social work helping process (Berman, 2006).

Borg, Brownlee, and Delaney (1995) noted earlier the cultural incompatibilities when working with First Nations people in a cross-cultural context by identifying that the “problem-focused, linear nature of social work practice is not congruous to the needs of Native people” (Borg et al., 1995, p. 119). “Healing and wellness in an Aboriginal world view involves a commitment to holism - that is, achieving harmony and balance between the spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional components of one’s being” (McKenzie & Morrisette, 2003, p. 18).

McKenzie and Morrisette (2003) recognized five core elements that are essential



to adopting a framework to effective practice with First Nations people

An understanding of the worldview of Aboriginal people and how this differs from the dominant Euro-Canadian world view, recognition of the effects of the colonization process, recognition of the importance of Aboriginal identity or consciousness, appreciation of the value of cultural knowledge and traditions in promoting healing and empowerment, and an understanding of the diversity in Aboriginal self-expression (p 7)

### **Culture shock**

Further to Zapf's (1985, 1999) contributions to the field of northern practice, he also conducted a study (Zapf, 1993) that hypothesized that social workers "from southern Canada would exhibit the U-curve pattern over their first year in the north" (p 696) The "U-curve" is a curvilinear shape used to describe that culture shock occurs and is followed by recovery (p 696) Zapf (1993) defined culture as "a network of shared meanings taken for granted as reality by those who interact within the network" (p 695), and he described culture shock as "initial feelings of optimism and challenge [that] give way to frustration and confusion as the person is unable to interact in a meaningful way in the new setting" (p 695)

Zapf (1993) summarized that the literature on a person entering a new culture agreed "that a stress reaction derived from the inability to understand cultural cues is inevitable in cross-cultural encounters" (p 695) and that everyone working cross-culturally "can expect a negative experience but the subjective experience varies from person to person in symptoms, intensity, and duration" (p 695) "When people first move to a new culture, they take with them their assumed meaning structure from home"

(p 695), this creates misunderstandings and conflicts that “are inevitable because of the differences in meanings, rules, and values between the two cultures” (p 695) He added that the literature noted that the frustration and “culture shock”, when resolved, leads to restored confidence and integration with the new culture, this is known as recovery The findings of this research confirmed the hypothesis and added that structural variables such as the presence of colleagues and features of the new job were associated with culture shock, but individual variables including past environmental mobility, breadth of education, related work experience were not (Zapf, 1993) The structural variables were not connected to recovery, but the individual variables were This study is important to cross-cultural social work practice, especially in northern communities, as it weaves together different threads of the literature Zapf’s (1993) study supported the notion that the concept of culture can be more broadly defined than race and ethnicity, and also suggested that both personal and structural variables influence a social worker’s experience of culture shock in different ways The culture shock that a social worker experiences impacts their work, thus confirming that a social worker’s practice is subjective, not objective This study discussed the northern and rural aspects of Canadian social work practice and pointed out that, to some, northern Canada is like a Third World country This compounded with the “uneasy fit between urban-based practice models and the realities of northern communities” (p 695) and the fact that “social workers are pressured to move from an objective position as an outsider to identification as an insider in the community, struggling to redefine the work role to meet community needs” forces social workers to “move across cultures”

## **Summary**

This literature review provided an overview of the concepts that are woven through this research project. The examination of the literature demonstrates that there is a need to explore the experiences of White female social workers in northern BC, as there has not been any research conducted on this topic. As indicated above much of the literature on northern social work practice focuses on social workers' experiences working rurally and remotely, but does not address the unique experiences that female social workers have. This is especially interesting because most social workers are women. This research study will address the gap in the literature by examining northern practice from women's perspectives.

### **Chapter Three Research Methodology**

This chapter discusses the research design and reviews the following topics qualitative research, thematic analysis, ethical considerations, recruiting, data collection, data analysis, and methodological integrity

#### **Qualitative Research**

In order to explore the experiences of White female social workers who work with First Nations people in northern BC, the methodology that was applied to this research is qualitative. Qualitative inquiry has its own set of standards to measure precision, exactness, and rigor that are often contrary to the tradition of quantitative inquiry. Qualitative research is often exploratory and seeks to understand people's perspectives in the context of their reality, which is socially constructed. Since it is the participants' experiences, thoughts, and beliefs which were explored it would be challenging to quantify the data. Sherman, Reid, and Sherman (1994) agree with this rationale stating, "qualitative methods may portray complexities and nuances that cannot be adequately depicted by quantitative data" (p. 14). Since measuring people's experiences with a quantitative methodology is challenging, I choose to use the qualitative methodology of thematic analysis. This research is interpretive with the results emerging from the data and not via mathematical or statistical procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I conducted this research by using semi-structured interviews that were "directed to the participant[s'] experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions about the theme in question" (Patton, 2002, p. 196). Data was obtained on how the participants "think and feel in the most direct ways" (Patton, 2002, p. 96).

## **Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis focuses on themes that emerge through the interview process. Literature describing what thematic analysis is and how to conduct it is quite limited. Thematic analysis is a method for “identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data and often interprets various aspects of the research topic” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Braun and Clarke point out that even though it is widely used, there is no clear way to go about conducting thematic analysis. Both Attride-Stirling (2002) and Braun and Clarke concur that, regardless of how thematic analysis is conducted, the material must be analyzed in a methodical manner and the epistemological position of the researcher must be transparent.

Thematic analysis can be either essentialist/realist or constructionist in its approach, or a combination of the two called “contextualist” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This research embraced the ‘contextualist’ method because, from a structural social work perspective, it “acknowledge[s] the ways individuals make meaning of their experiences and, in turn, the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of ‘reality’” (p. 81). This research also “reflect[s] reality and unpick[s] or unravel[s] the surface of ‘reality’” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). Again, an important note is the necessity that the researcher’s theoretical framework (epistemology) be clearly stated, “as it carries a number of assumptions about the nature of the data, what they represent in terms of the ‘the world’, ‘reality’, and so forth” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). The concept of ‘contextualist’ thematic analysis fits very well with the critical nature of the structural social work perspective that I bring to this research.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Prior to conducting the research, the UNBC Research Ethics Board approved the research project. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants, as were the risks and benefits of participating. My assurance of maintaining the participants' confidentiality was described to the participants as was the risk of anonymity being compromised. Anonymity could not be guaranteed, due to the limited number of social workers practicing in northern BC, however measures, such as removing identifying information from quotes and description, were taken to increase the likelihood of keeping the participants' identities anonymous. Another ethical consideration was obtaining informed consent from the participants. All the participants were adults capable of understanding the implication of participating in this research and all participants signed a consent form. The right to withdraw from the research was also explained to the participants. There was no deception or harmful procedures used in conducting this research.

## **Recruiting**

Purposive sampling was used in order to select participants that had rich and important information on the issues being studied (Patton, 2002). This was done by sending out an email to social workers in northern BC, and snowball sampling occurred through email networking and via word-of-mouth. Initially, I sent out an email to social workers that I knew fit the criteria of the research and also other professional colleagues in order to have them forward the information. In the email, I included a description of the research and an attachment file of the participant information sheet (Appendix 1). From this initial email I received fifteen responses from people indicating that they were

interested in participating. Some of the people who initially expressed interest did not respond to my requests to schedule a preliminary interview and some people did not fit the eligibility criteria. Due to the number of people who initially expressed interest in the research, I decided to impose another limitation on the study. I decided to interview women who were currently working in Prince George and who also had experience working in small rural communities in northern BC. This decision was made for convenience and also to draw on the experiences that the women had working in rural and urban northern communities, hence with First Nations people, which addresses cross-cultural experiences.

Once the potential participants were identified, I conducted a brief interview with most women to ensure that they met eligibility requirements. This interview did not happen with all the participants, as I had previous knowledge of some of the women's work history and knew that they met the requirements. During the preliminary interviews I reiterated the topic of exploration and from this process eight potential participants were identified and eight agreed to participate.

## **Data Collection**

### **The setting**

Once the participants agreed to be in the study an interview was scheduled with five of the eight. The interviews occurred at a location selected by the participants, four interviews took place at the participants' worksites and one was conducted at the participant's home. These interviews were the primary unit of analysis, with the participants' "informed consent" (Patton, 2002, p. 198) (Appendix 2). The informed consent reviews the topic of exploration for the study and also notifies participants of

their rights, including the right not to answer particular questions and the right to withdraw from the study. Initially, I anticipated interviewing between five and eight participants, however saturation was believed to have occurred with five interviews. Saturation is when redundancy or repetition of data occurs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202). Thus more interviews may not have yielded new data.

### **Instrumentation**

There were three instruments used in this study: the researcher, the interview, and the tape recorder. In qualitative research the researcher is an instrument (Patton, 2002). As the first instrument (the researcher), I brought my personal preferences and experiences to the study. I have personal experience similar to the participants, as I have worked in northern BC with First Nations people both in the rural/remote settings and in an urban setting. My theoretical perspective is derived from structural social work which informed the interview protocol. Some of my own preferences that assisted in forming the interview questions included my beliefs that where a social worker was raised and where they received their degree influences their experiences in the North, being a female impacts experiences as a social worker because social work is a sex-typed profession, participants that have had experience with First Nations people prior to working in the profession would have different experiences than those who did not. The questions about personal problems were formed to see if there was congruence between how the social workers viewed and dealt with their own personal problems as well as those of their clients. This was specifically structured to explore the social workers' beliefs about systemic issues and personal problems.

Further to my own beliefs, the interview protocol was informed by the literature



review that I completed. Other topics explored included the participants' views on the definition of culture and how social workers address cultural difference in their work, what is it like working in the North, and views on working with people who have different values than themselves.

The second instrument, the interview, was semi-structured (Patton, 2002) and was used to explore the experiences of the participants. I used standardized questions for all participants, but maintained flexibility to explore each participant's unique experience. The questions were structured to focus on the professional role of the participants, being a woman in northern BC, and working with First Nations people. These questions focused on both personal and work related issues and how the participants view oppression and privilege while exploring the participants' experiences as White female social workers working with First Nations people in northern BC. The interview protocol was developed with careful consideration of the literature reviewed. Participants were given a copy of the consent agreement (Appendix 2) for their personal records and were also provided with the interview protocol (Appendix 4) to refer to during the interview.

The third instrument was the tape recorder which documented the interview and allowed for verbatim transcribing to occur. The tape recorder captured the participants' voice, tone, speech rhythm, and silence. The recordings enabled the researcher to revisit the interviews as needed throughout the analysis process. The interviews ranged between 40 and 120 minutes.

### **Treatment of the Data**

The interviews were transcribed and stored in a locked cabinet. Participants were assigned a coded number in lieu of identifying information for the purpose of labelling.

Notes and transcripts are kept in a separate location from the consent forms. The transcripts, tapes, consent forms, and researcher's notes will be destroyed five years after the research has been completed.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

Maintaining confidentiality throughout the research was critical, as there are a limited number of social workers practicing in northern BC, therefore to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, no information about their identity has been revealed in this thesis.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed using the methods described by Braun and Clarke (2006). These steps include becoming familiar with the data, generating codes, identifying potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (p. 87). I established intimacy with the data by conducting all phases of analysis. I intended to transcribe the interviews myself; however, I accessed the services of two transcriptionists for this task. The transcriptionists signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix 3). I personally analyzed the transcripts for emergent themes in the data.

Analysis included the constant comparative method and repeated themes were looked for in order to generate ideas and theories based on those patterns. Coding of words and phrases was conducted by using the highlighting method, and then the codes were used as the units of measure for the purposes of data reduction. In order to protect participant privacy, descriptive quotes used for publication were reported without connection to identifying information. Coding was conducted with multiple cases comparing new observations to original concepts.

The analysis of data was informed with a structural social work perspective that shaped the interpretation of the data. The data was analyzed from a pre-established standard (structural social work) that views individual problems as stemming from society and attempts to analyze the structures and institutions that condone oppression.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest that in qualitative research “We should never collect data without substantial analysis going on simultaneously. Letting data accumulate without preliminary analysis along the way is a recipe for unhappiness, if not total disaster” (p. 2). The analysis for this research started during the first interview. After each interview was completed, they were then transcribed. I then read each transcript comparing it against the recorded interview and then had the participants verify the content of their interview.

During and after the interviews, I made notes on the interview protocol sheet and in my journal regarding some of the concepts, ideas, and dialogue that occurred. I also wrote down my own thoughts about the process after each interview. Initiating the analysis process from the beginning of the first interview allowed me to be familiar enough with the data so as to be aware of when saturation might have occurred. On-going analysis also prompted me to adjust the semi-structured interviews.

After the transcripts were verified, the entire data set was read and notes were again made in the journal. A second reading of the interviews occurred and this is when open coding began with the noting of potential themes; the potential themes were highlighted. Once this was complete, the potential themes were organized into a thematic map. This occurred by cutting and taping the sections of text to a large wall; this thematic map provided a visual space for me to look at the entire collection of potential themes.

Next the selected interview segments were organized and reorganized several times creating overarching themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. After this process was complete all the transcripts were reread to ensure that there was no data missing from the themes, this process happened twice.

### **Methodological Integrity**

Methodological integrity refers to the “rigor of a project, maintained by adherence to the assumptions, strategies, data appropriateness, adequacy, and so forth” (Morse, 2003, p 190). I will now discuss the methodological integrity of this research by reviewing rigor, credibility, confirmability, and reflexivity.

#### **Rigor**

Rigor (trustworthiness) was addressed throughout this research. “A rigorous human science is prepared to be ‘soft,’ ‘soulful,’ ‘subtle,’ and ‘sensitive’ in its effort to bring the range of meanings of life’s phenomena to our reflective awareness” (Van Manen, 1990, p18). Patton (2002) suggested that researchers are “rigorous in their analysis of the experience, so that basic elements of the experience that are common to members” emerge (p 106). I ensured that the research was rigorous by applying a variety of methods throughout the study. This began when I engaged with the participants in an attentive and meaningful manner while recording the interviews and taking personal notes. The audio recordings were transcribed word-for-word, then submitted to the participants for feedback and verification. This constant reviewing of the data through various methods permitted me to reflect deeply on the content of the interviews and assisted me to understand the true experiences of the women while being rigorous at the same time.

Another way that this research was rigorous is through my own reflexivity. Since I have an insider's view of the experiences of the participants I maintained my own personal notes through all stages of the research process. This enabled me to accurately reflect on the themes that emerged as well as my personal thoughts and views on the data that was collected. Being reflexive, also referred to as bracketing, means that the researcher clarifies their own preferences (Patton, 2002).

### **Credibility**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that credibility of research includes ensuring that the research methodology is appropriate to the study. As discussed earlier, this research examined the thoughts, beliefs, and experiences of the participants, therefore it was most appropriate to use the qualitative methodology of thematic analysis. Another important consideration for the methodological integrity of research is the reliability. Lincoln and Guba also suggest that the data and findings should be able to be upheld by another researcher. This is possible as I have provided an audit trail and have been clear about my own standpoints. The audit trail includes the taped interviews, interview transcripts, interview protocol, notes about the research, and some pictures I took during the analysis process. I believe that my attention to detail and the audit trail would result in very similar results, especially if another researcher had the same epistemological views of structural social work and also had similar personal and professional experiences.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is "concerned with establishing the fact that the data and interpretations of an inquiry were not merely figments of the inquirer's imagination."

Therefore it is necessary for researchers to connect their "assertions, findings, and interpretations, and so on to the data themselves in readily discernible ways" (Schwandt, 1997, p 164) My research is confirmable in the same ways that it is credible with having an audit possible Auditing is a process to verify the method and content of the research and to ensure that the researcher is accountable for the results Schwandt's view on auditing is that it is "a procedure whereby a third-party examiner systematically reviews the audit trail maintained by the inquirer" (p 6) Although an audit of my research was not completed, it is certainly possible

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is an important aspect of research McCracken (1988) says, "In qualitative research, the investigator serves as a kind of 'instrument' in the collection and analysis of data" (p 18) Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) suggest that, regarding reflexivity, "the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them" (p 16) Patton (2002) summarizes that reflexivity is "a way of emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one's perspective" (p 64) There are several ways for a researcher to be reflexive including keeping a reflexive journal where "information about their schedule and logistics, insights, and reasons for methodological decisions" (Erlandson et al , 1993, p 143) are recorded I kept a reflexive journal in the form of a note book and notations on the transcripts This enabled me to reflect on what the participants said, did not say, and how the data fits together I was also able to reflect on my own experiences of working with First Nations people and conceptualizing oppression and privilege This process assisted me in

maintaining awareness of my own personal thoughts, feelings, reactions, and concerns  
while engaging in the research process

## **Chapter Four Results**

In this chapter, I present the results of this qualitative research study which explored the experiences of White female social workers working with First Nations people in northern British Columbia

Participants' quotations were edited for confidentiality, ease of reading, and clarity, repeated words and filler words such as "ah" and "um" were removed and replaced with ellipses and inserted words were represented by square parenthesis. In order to increase anonymity and confidentiality, the participants are not identified with pseudonyms, the participants are represented by a single undifferentiated voice. Identifying information such as current professional roles has also been eliminated in order to maintain anonymity.

This research was structured to focus on the three main concepts of gender, culture, and geography. In order to identify the women's experiences of being a White female social worker working in northern British Columbia with First Nations people, the interview protocol was divided into the following four areas: 1) demographic information, 2) the women's professional role as a social worker, 3) being a woman in northern British Columbia, and 4) working with First Nations people. From the original four areas of focus, six themes emerged from the data: Social Work Is..., Two Realities, Northern Life, Different Culture/ Different Values, Cross-cultural Relationship Building, and Be Educated, Educate, and Advocate! Each theme contains a number of sub themes which will be explored in detail throughout this chapter.



### **Participant Overview**

The five participants in this research are all White female social workers who have lived and worked in small communities north of Prince George, British Columbia (BC) where they worked with First Nations people. All of the participants have had at least two roles in the following five areas of social work practice: addictions, mental health, child protection, private practice counselling, and education. One woman identified as having experience in a management position. At the time of the interviews the participants had from six to twenty-five years of social work experience for a combined practice totalling sixty-six years. Each of the participants has practiced their entire social work career in northern BC.

One social worker was born in northern BC and another moved to the North as a youth over thirty years ago. The other three social workers have lived in northern BC for fifteen to twenty-five years. All of the social workers have at least one social work degree from the University of Northern British Columbia's School of Social Work, a structural school of social work. At the time of the interviews all five social workers had a Bachelor of Social Work degree and three of the social workers had a Master of Social Work degree. Three of the social workers were enrolled in three different post secondary degree programs. At the time of the interviews the participants varied in age from thirty-nine to fifty-four. All of the participants had more than one child.

### **Social Work Is**

The first theme, Social Work Is, has five sub themes: Women's Work, Ruled by Men, Juxtaposing Professional and Personal Worlds, Twenty-Four/Seven, and A Fit

### **Women's work**

The participants suggested that the profession of social work tends to be feminized or “women’s work” One participant suggested, “it [social work] is female dominated there [is] some feminine culture that occurs in social work particularly around sort of the ethos of social caring ” The participants mentioned that society does not value women’s work as much as men’s work They suggested that there is less importance placed on the need for the funding of social programs where more women than men tend to work One participant suggested that this is due to the fact that the social work profession typically does not make money for society even though the profession does something that is much more important In turn, it was suggested that social workers are not fairly compensated or respected for the work they do One participant summarized this view saying, “women’s work is less valued I think monetarily for sure so I don’t know that it gets as much respect ”

Throughout the interviews the women made comments that supported the notion that they, themselves, believe that social work is “women’s work” One woman suggested, “women are more spiritual and nurturers than men and so it’s more appropriate for women to be in these roles I think it seems like the natural way cuz women are healers and nurturers ” A similar sentiment was expressed by another woman who stated that it is a natural gender role for women to be in the caring profession, especially if the work focuses on children She said

When you are working with women who have children and you have children, there are those natural places gender specific that you can only understand gender specific, right, and then that becomes broader based on if you have had those

same experiences, you know if you both have kids, if I am working with a community, with a group of women that all have kids, I have kids, that expands it, if I don't have kids it comes in a bit, right, so those kinds of things

### **Ruled by men**

The participants discussed their views that men are typically in positions of authority within the social work profession. There was a suggestion that the reasons that men are in positions of power are systemic in nature, it was also suggested that these reasons could be due to the multiple roles and responsibilities that women have and are expected to have outside of work. All of the women discussed the roles and responsibilities that they have regarding their own family obligations, as social workers, and for some prior to becoming social workers.

The women suggested that most of the workers in the social work profession are women and most of the managers are men. One woman reflected

Most of the frontline workers and the people that I work with are women, but a lot of people in the management positions are men. I would say the majority of middle management positions are men, and upper management are men. I don't know the statistics around that, but that's what I see.

Another participant viewed the male path to management as being connected to the fact that women traditionally take on the caregiver roles at home, which enable men who have children to work overtime and advance more easily than women. She continued to suggest that this advancement might be easier for men because men are also in positions of authority and might value the extra time that men are able to put into their work in order to meet the demands of the extra workload.

Maybe they're able to work overtime more because they have a partner at home taking care of the children maybe they don't have the double workday that women do they come from a place of privilege just simply by being men And that is valued by men who are doing the hiring, the management

One woman, who had been in management, suggested that she had to be more qualified than men in the same positions She reflected, "Often it felt like I had to have more degrees to get into the same positions so, at one point I was the only female on a management team but also the only person that had a masters degree " Other women expressed that they had never tried to compete against men for management positions These women did not overtly recognize systemic barriers that might get in the way of their own professional advancement Through most of the interviews there was a sense that the women did believe that they could attain whatever goals they set, but there was also recognition that attaining their goals was much more complicated than having the desire and determination to do so One woman summarized this notion by saying, "I would have said that I was independent minded I either got somewhere or didn't get somewhere because of who I was as an independent person but it's so much more complicated than that "

Overall, the women acknowledged that there are systemic barriers to women becoming managers within a bureaucracy, but they also believed that they could overcome those barriers if they choose to Such barriers include the women's roles outside their professional world and their abilities to juggle dual responsibilities

### **Juxtaposing professional and personal worlds**

All of the participants are mothers and only one participant became a social worker after her children were adults. The women talked about the demands of being a parent and a professional. The participants view women as having a double work day and they suggested that they placed their own children and familial obligations ahead of professional aspirations and responsibilities. Participants also acknowledged the challenges of balancing professional and personal lives. The woman who had experience as a manager talked about the difficulties that being a parent posed for her professionally. She suggested that the male managers never would have had the same challenges regarding being a parent. She said that there were times when child care was accommodated for male managers, but she did not feel that, as a woman, she could draw attention to the fact that her children needed her at home. She described her experience

I had elementary aged children and their dad was out of town a lot. As a manager you're often expected to travel quite often on short notice and that was virtually impossible for me to travel on short notice and so you know I told people I could travel if I had a week's notice I could make the arrangements but I couldn't on a Tuesday afternoon say I can be at Victoria on Tuesday night and I felt that that was a bit of a problem at times and there was two or three times where male managers did not have that same expectation in fact if we were on a conference call and a male manager said oh I can't attend that meeting at such and such a day because I'm doing child care the women on the phone would say oh that's great you know obviously we need to change that around but I always felt that I could not make it visible that I had children that were dependant on me to be home and

maybe that's just my stuff but I felt I did not feel that I could do that and then they [male managers] would be accommodated for having children

The women talked about being clear that their family obligations are their first priority, but acknowledged that it is challenging to leave work at work. They discussed the challenges of being a social worker when at home and suggested that you do not stop being a social worker when you stop getting paid for the day.

### **Twenty-Four/Seven**

The social workers identified the importance of attempting to make “work work and home home” but recognized that it is extremely hard to do. One description of how social workers view themselves as social workers twenty-four hours a day seven days a week captures the overall flavour of the social workers' views. One woman described it this way:

So I've just learned to be able to for the most part separate and leave the professional stuff at work so when I'm done my paid day for the day I go home but saying that I believe that social workers are social workers twenty-four /seven you are one, and so you know it's not that I just go home and I'm no longer a social worker but professionals are paid people and I limit it and I do the piece I'm paid to do and then go home.

For the participants, being a social worker was a part of who they are. They are social workers twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and get paid for some of it and live the other part. This notion of being a social worker all the time fits well with the idea that social work is a “fit” for these women and is congruent for them both professionally and personally. Both of these themes will be explored further in this

chapter

### **A fit**

The participants suggested that the profession is a “fit” for them. Within this sub theme the social workers suggested that the diversity of work within the profession was a “fit” as was the work being meaningful and satisfying to the women. Some of the participants suggested that they were “mini social workers” or wanted to be a social worker at a young age. One woman reflected

I can think about things that I did as a six year old that were like being a mini social worker. I can remember having a little friend who had Down Syndrome and defending her in the playground as a six year old and all through my life. I finally decided to go to University. I actually did some career testing and social work was one of them and it's just always been a fit.

The participants saw diversity within the profession as also being a “fit”, because they said that it provides an opportunity for different day-to-day work experiences, they also suggested that the profession is “a fit” for them because of the different possibilities within the profession as a whole. This notion is reflected in the following quote, “For me social work was a natural fit in that it is very social and it is different every day, so I never feel like I have the same job every day.” Another woman reflected in this way

From a systems point we look at individual processes which is the counselling processes but we also look at the systems processes and that's a legitimate role for social work you know when I get too frustrated with the systems stuff and I go back to doing individual stuff and when I get too bored of doing counselling then I can move back to the systems stuff so it's been great for me.

Overall, all of the participants agreed that being a social worker is a “fit” for them because they believe that the work is meaningful and important. The ability to care and connect with people is also an important “fit” for the participants and so is the flexibility within the day-to-day work and the profession in general.

### **Two Realities**

The women in this research view the issues of oppression and privilege as being intertwined in their personal and professional lives. This intertwining of privilege and oppression is difficult to unravel. The women recognized oppression and privilege that they have experienced, however when they recognized the oppression that they faced, personally, the women tended to compare it to the oppression that their clients face. Overall, it was challenging for the women to acknowledge their personal and professional oppression that they have experienced, especially when working with highly oppressed individuals.

#### **Oppressed reality**

All of the participants agreed that they are oppressed as women. This excerpt illustrates the participants' views on being oppressed: “I think as a female, as a woman I have experienced oppression, not on the same level as other people I'm certain but as a female I feel like I have been oppressed.” When talking about how they are oppressed the participants suggested that the oppression that they experience comes from societal or systemic issues. Another quote that conveys the participants' views that they are oppressed is, “I feel very fortunate for a lot of things, but if you were to put it into context of society and priorities in society and resources and accessibility and all



that, then I would have to say yes ”

All of the participants recognized that they were oppressed within systems and all of the participants had difficulty expressing how they experienced oppression on an individual personal level. This difficulty of connecting systemic oppression to personal experiences was illustrated when the women were asked how their own personal problems connect to the bigger picture of society. I posed the same question to all participants, “How do you see your own personal problems as they connect to the bigger picture (society)?” The first three participants acknowledged difficulty with the question or asked for clarification. The fourth participant also expressed difficulty with the question and eventually suggested that the personal problem was connected to her work not being financially compensated fairly because it is not valued in society. She eventually connects this devaluing of pay to patriarchy, a systemic issue. When the fifth participant was asked the question, she did not answer it, but discussed some of her privilege. She said, “I do also recognize that I have some privilege I do have because I’ve had access to education that puts you in a more privilege position ” She then suggested

I’m just like any other woman in that way it doesn’t matter how tough or competent or educated I look underneath that role I’m just a woman like any other woman I mean we’ve all pretty much had the same issues I think

Personalizing systemic oppression was challenging for the participants. Later in the interview, I asked the participants the question, how do you encourage your clients to see how their personal problems connect to the bigger picture (society)? And none of the participants asked for clarification, all easily answered the question. Overall, each of the participants recognized that they, as women, had experienced systemic oppression, but

they had difficulty articulating how this impacted their own personal lives. The participants suggested that even though they have been oppressed, it is not on the same level as other people, especially the people that they work with. The women recognized that they are members of an oppressed group by virtue of being female in a patriarchal society, but they also suggested that they are privileged. This woman's quote holds true for all the participants. She said, "I believe that I am oppressed but I also feel I'm very privileged."

### **Privileged reality**

The participants recognized that they were privileged by being White, by being from or being perceived as being from the middle class, by having an education, by having supportive and encouraging family, and by having opportunities, they also viewed confidence as having an important role in the privilege that they have. This description of how privilege fits into one participant's world captures the essence of the five participants' descriptions of being privileged compared to the people that they work with. She explained

Well I have tons of privilege compared to First Nations people, right, because you know the way the race and class and income and education all interface. I have way more privilege on almost all those dimensions and so the male female structure gets demoted to a much lower level when looked at in terms of First Nations and I mean my privilege a lot of it was around growing up in a family where you know you were pushed to be something compared to the lives of many First Nations people in Canada that was a privilege because it gave you a sense that if you wanted to do it you could you could climb a mountain if you

wanted to you could you know do a cartwheel if you wanted to - that's a privilege that's probably more important than things like wealth yes there's no question that I have privilege

### ***Being White***

The women talked about being visibly White and the automatic privilege that is attached to being White. They also suggested that the wrongs of the past are not their burden to carry even though they may feel somewhat guilty about historical events that have contributed to the current circumstances faced by First Nations people. The women reflected on their experiences of challenging oppressive structures and people working within those structures. The women suggested that being White gives them an automatic privilege and they recognize that non-White people do not have the same privileges. One woman described

I think that people make assumptions about you if you're White and there's privileges with being White people get jobs bank loans if you're non-white there's stereotypes that people have to face all the time

Another participant commented on the stereotypes and discrimination that people have to face. She was once mistaken as being a First Nations person and she recalled how the experience impacted her

We do have White privilege and don't even know that for the most part but to be treated as a First Nations person in a very discriminatory manor I was amazed and horrified and you know what that does to your self esteem you know that's something that I wasn't aware of

The women spoke both of recognizing that historical events are not their own responsibility and of how they also tend to feel guilty about the same events that have lead to the current challenges that First Nations people face today. One of the social workers articulated the conflicting views when she suggested, “I have to get over my defensiveness of creating the White oppressor. I also didn’t create that but I have to recognize that that’s what I represent today.”

Two participants noted that even though they are visibly White, they tended to focus on the work they were doing rather than the difference between themselves and the communities where they worked. One woman said, “I’m tall and White and look like I might be part of the oppressive middle class. I mean I know I look like all those things but I think it’s around engagement.” Another woman said

It never dawned on me that I needed to be alarmed that I might be the only White person on the reserve. For me it was about how do I communicate in the best way possible what it is that they are asking me to do.

Even though the primary focus of being in First Nations communities was being a social worker, the participants recognized that both they and the communities needed to acknowledge that there are differences between the social workers, as a White person and the community, as First Nations people. Overall, the social workers suggested that being White did impact their work. One woman said, “It definitely impacts things. [I am a] blonde, White, female social worker going in to work in Aboriginal Communities. You have to work harder to get past that.” Another woman put it this way, “for the most part people were absolutely wonderful once they got around the fact that I was White and

once I got around the fact that I was White ” Another participant reflected

Being White influences my work because being White unfortunately in society it has always been a privilege and people are going to make assumptions about you people are going to probably treat you differently than if you weren't White so I'm always aware of that piece

The participants accepted that they were highly visible as a White person, especially when working on a First Nations reserve They suggested that first and foremost they were there to work, but with their work came the responsibility to acknowledge the privilege that they have as a White person The social workers had to recognize the privilege that society places on being White and how that may be perceived by the individuals in the community where they were working The social workers acknowledged the challenge that that posed for both themselves and the communities

### **Northern Life**

The theme of Northern Life is woven throughout the participants' descriptions of their experiences It is important to note the place where the experiences occurred in order to have the appropriate context of this theme All of the participants practiced their entire social work career in the North I point this out because of the implicitness of where the women practiced social work This implicitness was present throughout their accounts, much like the way the participants spoke about their work with First Nations people The sub themes within this theme of Northern Life are High Visibility of both social issues and the social workers, Connectedness, and Congruence

### **High visibility of social issues**

The five women who participated in this research spoke of working in the North

as providing them with career opportunities that they may not have had elsewhere. The women suggested that they were happy with their career being in northern British Columbia although they recognized some factors that may not be as visible in large urban settings. The women recognized that both their role as a social worker and social issues, ranging from racism to patriarchy, are highly visible in the North.

One woman reflected on her views of the visible social issues in the North. She also made note of the career opportunities in the North. This quote describes the overall sentiments of the participants:

I didn't really see blatant racism. And when I moved to the community that I moved to, it's a little tiny town, 2,000 people. It was very hierarchal and patriarchal, and not a lot of things for women to do. Things were sort of built around the guys in the community. I noticed that Aboriginal people were really treated poorly and I just remember that feeling of unease, and I hadn't noticed it until I moved to northern BC. It wasn't as blatant [elsewhere] I guess. I like living in northern BC for the most part. I've had some pretty good opportunities for employment and things like that living in the North.

Another participant voiced frustration about the social issues in the North and acknowledges the high visibility of the issues:

You know sometimes I get really frustrated with it when I visit other parts of the province and then you come back here and some of the social problems that we realize here that are really really evident and really visible are not addressed and maybe they're not addressed anywhere but they're really visible here like the homelessness issues some of the poverty, the trauma that

aboriginal people have experienced and it's just you can't walk down a street here and not see it

### **High visibility of social workers**

The participants suggested that social workers were highly visible in small communities. For some this was a challenge, especially when they were not working. One participant described the challenges of being a social worker in a small community. She suggested that small community practice was difficult due to the high visibility.

When I worked in a really small community it was really difficult especially working in child protection because you'd run into it was such a small community and there was such an overlap in clients and friends and that kind of stuff. It was very difficult living there and as a single person there was only a couple of good restaurants and one of them was a bar and you know that's where you know clients would be or whatever and it was very hard.

Compounded with the fact that social workers, as individuals, are highly visible in small communities, the social workers faced challenges of dealing with negative perceptions of the role of social workers. The participants recognized that there are often misconceptions about what the role of a social worker is. They suggested that often social workers are perceived as being "a child protection social worker", "people that scoop the children", "tak[ing] away people's children" and "baby snatchers". The participants dealt with this stereotype differently. One participant suggested that in small communities the negative stereotype about social workers only being child protection workers could be broken while another participant suggested that she found it more helpful not to identify herself as a social worker.

Even though the participants recognized the associations of child protection with the social work profession, the participants acknowledged that there is diversity within the social work profession. This diversity, for some participants, is the reason that they are social workers. One woman said

My career has been so diverse I can move from area to area but still use the same philosophy and value system in each of those jobs and I've had all those doors open to me because I have a social work degree

### **Connectedness**

For the participants, the high visibility of their profession and social issues created a feeling of connectedness in the North. The social workers identified this notion of connectedness as being important for them and suggested that it is related to both their practice and their personal lives. One participant suggested that better work is done in the North compared to elsewhere, suggesting that this is due to connection and high visibility

In fact if anything we do better practice in the North because we care and we live in our communities and we have to have long lives in our communities and that makes us different and I think that overall that makes us better

Another woman captures the essence of the passion that the participants have for working in the North

I can't see myself in those bigger centers and it is because of the connectedness to people and I think not only the connectedness to people but you get to see larger impact from the results of your work, does that make sense?



## **Congruence**

The social workers expressed that along with the complex web of connectedness within northern communities, congruence is important for them. This was noted in terms of their own personal and professional lives being congruent and the value that they place on their mentors being congruent. One woman described that working in a small community, “requires sort of really generalist eclectic social work, lots of community development, lots of networking, lots of working in partnerships, lots of collaboration and real congruency between your sort of professional and personal role.” She continued to describe the importance of congruence, especially working in the North. She clearly articulated the overall sense of pride that the participants have related to working in the North. She described how being a social worker in the North for many years has impacted her due to the fact that her personal and professional lives are highly visible.

Because I’ve been up here in the North for 20 years what’s been a privilege is my life intertwines with other peoples at various levels. I’ve had some really very very nice positive feedback over the years, you know, making an impact on somebody’s life so that keeps you going and you only get that because of that personal professional interaction and I think you get that much more in the North than you would ever get that in the south you just don’t bump into people in the same kind of way that’s very rewarding.

The women explained that they have turned to mentors for professional support and guidance. The mentors tended to be individuals who the women looked up to and had respect for and who they perceived as being like-minded. The participants suggested that, like themselves, the mentors must be congruent in their personal and professional lives.

## **Different Culture/Different Values**

The fourth theme that emerged from the interviews is Different Culture/ Different Values. Within this theme the participants discussed their meaning of culture, and they suggested that different life experiences create different values for people. The participants recognized that their clients have had very different life experiences than they, themselves, have had.

### **Culture**

The social workers in this study suggested that culture permeates through the lives and experiences of peoples in implicit and explicit ways. One participant suggested, “Culture is everything. It’s what we eat, how we live, it’s everything” while another participant said it is, “where you live, how you are raised, a shared value and belief systems.” One social worker expanded on the concept of culture to include unwritten rules, assumptions, and celebrations. She said:

I guess culture would be the unwritten rule, how you live your life, it’s your beliefs, the assumptions that you’re raised with, the ways you celebrate different events in life, it’s a way of being, that you’re not really aware of. You’re raised in it, and that’s not even apparent until you run into somebody who has a whole different way of being.

Another social worker suggested that culture is more than activities, she viewed culture as being “socially constructed” and “internalized.” She described culture in the following way:

Culture is, it’s embedded somehow in who you are, it’s certainly not the activities that are associated with the culture that make it culture. I think it’s much

more intrinsic than that and I think it is socially constructed it's a belief system, it's a value system, it's a recognition of where you sort of fit in the world in some ways which you internalize

The participants in this research described culture as being embedded within people's lives in both visible and non-visible ways They suggested that culture includes where and how individuals live, consume food, and participate in celebrations as well as the unwritten rules, assumptions, and values/belief systems people have

### **Values**

The participants revealed that in the beginning of their career it was hard working with people who had a different value system One participant suggested that in the beginning of her career it was difficult to work with people who had different values but that changed as she became more experienced She suggested, "at first it was very very difficult but its gotten easier and easier over the years " Another participant reflected on the first time she worked with a man who abused his spouse She wondered if she could do it and quickly realized that she can work with people who have different belief systems Her words are

In social work you quite quickly come across women who are victims of spousal abuse and there's always that fear like what am I going to do when I come across the man who's the batterer and as a new social worker I think I was a bit frightened of that I sort of wanted to hate this person and dislike them because it was a much easier stance to take but you know when I started working with them, do I agree with how they manage with their coping with the stresses in their life? Obviously not but once I get to know them I actually understand more of what's

happened and you know certainly we need to address that and make some changes, they have a very different belief system, but can I work with them? Yes I have to because it would be ridiculous if we didn't

The participants expected that their clients would have different values than themselves. They suggested that they do not think poorly of their clients, but acknowledge the challenging life experiences that the clients have had which leads to them having different values and beliefs. Overall, the women tended to expect that clients would have different values than themselves. The social workers suggested that the difference is interesting and helps them to learn. One woman pointed out how she learns from people's different values and beliefs by saying, "I really get interested in working with people that have completely different beliefs from me because I think it is interesting, I think it's acceptable, I certainly encourage it and I learn lots."

### **Cross-Cultural Relationship Building**

The fifth theme that emerged from the data is Cross-Cultural Relationship Building. Within this theme are the three sub themes of Take Time, Don't Assume, and Be Curious.

#### **Take time**

The participants discussed the importance of building meaningful and genuine relationships with the First Nations people that they work with. The social workers said that a large part of building relationships is done by taking time to learn from the individuals and the communities where they were working, and having the communities get to know them as a person. The time spent building trust and rapport was important on a one-on-one level and also on a community level. One woman described

It's the whole process of building those relationships and I find spending the first length of time working with the community asking them to teach me, and somewhere in that process of the community teaching you, it naturally comes out where it needs to be, right, so then it is clear where what I have can complement what is already there

### **Don't assume**

The participants expressed their belief that it was very important not to make assumptions or be perceived as making assumptions about their First Nations clients. It was important to the participants not to assume that all First Nations people have had similar experiences, it was also important not to stereotype experiences that their clients might have had, such as having parents that attended a residential school. The participants suggested that in order to do this they must be respectful and curious about the person's life experience.

### **Be curious**

Being curious and respectful about their clients' culture and experiences was a theme that emerged connected to building relationships. The participants said that there is diversity within First Nations people that needs to be acknowledged respectfully. The social workers suggested that it is their own responsibility to be curious and open about the people that they work with in order to effectively build relationships. One participant said

I try to be very respectful of what other people's cultures are and very curious because I'm very interested in that. I use humour to try to understand or to try to talk about my lack of understanding or my own cultural bias. I have a very

open mind and am very curious about how people make sense of their lives and how they view the world

For the participants, being curious and open was important when it comes to working cross-culturally. The social workers also suggested that it was important that they, as professionals, acknowledge their own ignorance or lack of knowledge about their client's culture. This overt acknowledgement to individuals or a community is a way to learn and build a trusting relationship. It enables the clients to teach the social worker what is important for them to know and creates knowledge for the social worker to implement important cultural activities or practices into their work according to each client's or community's need. One participant suggested that she points out that she needs to learn, she suggested, "I identify that I have some ignorance around their culture, I'm still learning about it so I ask." Another participant expressed the importance of learning and described how she inserts relevant cultural practices into the work that she does.

I think it's extremely important we make a huge effort to learn more about their culture and to embrace where they came from and be open sometimes we start off with cultural prayers or practices such [as] sweet grass ceremonies and things like that. So, I think that it really sets the tone that we recognize and we embrace and see culture as a strength and we try not to ignore that. I think it's extremely important in the work that we do especially in the work that we do with children.

### **Be Educated, Educate, and Advocate'**

The sixth theme that emerged from the data is Be Educated, Educate, and

Advocate' This theme focuses on the social workers taking on multiple roles of teacher, learner, and advocate. The social workers expressed that they see themselves as facilitating and encouraging the client to learn both about personal and societal issues. The role of learner (Be Educated) for the social workers is multifaceted. The social workers believe that they need to learn from the people that they are working with, and they also need to have knowledge regarding societal and systemic issues, especially as they are related to First Nations people. The role of learner is also important to the social workers on a personal level, as they view their formal education as having empowered them. The Be Educated sub theme also means that the social workers need to be grounded and aware of their own need for personal growth and development. The Advocate sub theme emerged as the social workers discussed their ability to use their positions of privilege to assist those who are oppressed.

### **Be educated**

The sub theme Be Educated is about both formal and informal learning for the participants. The social workers discussed the importance of being formally educated and aware of the broad systemic and societal issues that have contributed to the marginalization and oppression that individuals face. All of the participants attended a structural school of social work and the descriptions and experiences that they shared suggested that they view society's problems as being systemic. One participant identified herself as a structural social worker and suggested

I'm also a structural social worker so I see people that are maybe marginalized or homeless or whatever that they are not there through fault of their own, they are there through problems of society, that's why they're there not because they

have done something wrong

Another participant summarized the views of the social workers by saying that as a social worker she needs to be able to connect to individuals while having awareness of broader issues. She suggested that social workers must, “Be able to empathize and communicate and look at the bigger picture of society. The bigger issues. It’s not just the personal, right? It’s political.”

The participants identified that being educated is also connected to their own personal growth and maturing. One participant suggested that for her, “showing up in my own life” and taking initiative is valuable. She described

Sometimes we don’t know that we have a choice and that was certainly my learning is that I can make different choices and you know I call it showing up in my own life in the best way that I can instead of waiting for somebody else to take care of me or to make me happy or to make good choices for me ~ that’s my job and that’s a lifetime of learning. I didn’t know that and I certainly wasn’t taught that.

For the participants being healthy and having a balanced lifestyle was also important, the women saw these concepts as personal empowerment. One participant said that she does this by, “Having healthy relationships practicing self-care and feeling good about where I’m at and feeling okay with getting older and all those good things.”

### **Educate**

When talking about educating clients, the social workers suggested that individual blame and responsibility needs to be removed, the social workers explained that the most important thing that they do to help empower First Nations people is to educate them



about what has happened in history with regards to systemic issues such as colonization and residential schools. One participant's description of how she educates is congruent with how the other participants also viewed their role regarding educating First Nations people when they are working with them.

Some of it is taking away individual blame and responsibility for things that were not theirs to take responsibility for so you know the whole residential school thing for First Nations people that was not their choice or their responsibility, the legacy of that also is not their responsibility but until they start understanding that it was very difficult for them to be any other way than what they are because of their experiences, they can't then take individual responsibility so it's around shifting, to me, shifting the blame to the larger context and giving yourself a break for things that you can't control that were systemic issues and then taking individual responsibilities for the things that you can change.

### **Advocate'**

The sub theme Advocate' was a topic that the social workers identified as being a role that they took when working with oppressed people. The social workers said that they used their own privilege to assist others to have their voices heard. The participants used their own privileges of knowledge of systems, their Whiteness, and their professional status in order to assist their First Nations clients. One woman described how the social workers use their privilege to be an advocate for their clients.

[I know] the process so then I can open those doors and help explain the circumstances you know, why she's in the situation she is in and because I'm the right colour and the right academic background and I'm a community

professional that it gives me more power in society than the people that I'm working with. So, it's significant you know when I'm dealing with these systems that the people we work with are dealing with

One participant described that she assists clients to learn how to advocate for themselves. She stated, "It's trying to empower them and learn how to empower themselves. Learn how to advocate for themselves according to what they want."

For the social workers, the theme *Be Educated, Educate, and Advocate!* is the heart of the work that they do. This theme permeates throughout the women's shared experiences of being a White female social worker working in northern BC with First Nations people. The theme *Be Educated, Educate, and Advocate!* reflects how the social workers take initiative for their professional responsibilities and assist the people that they are working with.

## **Summary**

This chapter provided an account of the six themes that emerged from this research that focused on the experiences of five White female social workers working in northern BC with First Nations people. The six themes: *Social Work Is*, *Two Realities*, *Northern Life*, *Different Culture/Different Values*, *Cross-Cultural Relationship Building*, and *Be Educated, Educate, and Advocate!* have added many threads to an intricate tapestry created from the social workers' descriptions of their own experiences. Just as the loom, thread, and dye all affect the final outcome of a weaver's tapestry, there are many factors that contributed to the collective voices of the social workers in this research. This chapter has woven together the experiences of the five participating women. The next chapter reviews the limitations, implications for social work practice,

and suggestions for future research thus revealing the “bigger picture” of the tapestry, created from the women’s described experiences

## **Chapter Five Discussion**

The purpose of my research was to explore the participants' views, thoughts, and experiences of being a member of an oppressed group and a privileged group simultaneously while working with members of another oppressed group. The research specifically examined these concepts by interviewing White female social workers who had experience working in northern BC with First Nations people. The six themes that emerged from the data support existing literature and also illustrate some gaps in the literature which point towards areas of future research.

This research also sheds light on implications for social work practice and social work education. The six themes that emerged from the data are: Social Work Is , Two Realities, Northern Life, Different Culture/ Different Values, Cross-cultural Relationship Building, and Be Educated, Educate, and Advocate'. This concluding chapter reviews the limitations of the research, conclusions, and recommendations.

### **Limitations**

Even though the intent of this research was not to generalize the results to the broader White female social work population working in northern BC, the small sample size of this study was a limitation. Having said that, Patton (2002) discussed the notion that even if sample sizes are small, there can still be something learned from them. He suggests that "one can learn from them – and learn a great deal, often opening up new territory for further research" (p. 46). The "learning" that can be taken away from this research will be discussed further in the recommendations section.

Another limitation of this study was the lack of demographic diversity among the participants. It was an unforeseen, but not surprising, variable that all the participants

had received at least one degree from the UNBC School of Social Work. Four of the participants received their bachelor's degree at UNBC and one of the participants obtained a BSW at another institution, but immediately commenced work in the North and eventually received a Master's in Social Work from UNBC. In addition to all participants having attended UNBC, all the participants had practiced their entire career in northern British Columbia, all participants were mothers, and all participants were over the age of thirty-nine at the time of the interviews. These factors limited the diversity of the participants. Having identified factors that suggest that the women were quite similar in some demographic areas, it is important to note that they were very different from one another as individuals.

Overall, the small sample size and the unforeseen demographic similarities are a limitation, as more diversity within the sample could have resulted in different themes emerging from the data. For example, if the study had women who were not mothers, the theme related to child rearing and familial expectations would not have emerged as prominently. Another possibility is that if the participants were all in a younger age group, there may not have been as much reflection or stated experiences related to limitations that the women view as being present in the profession for women. Regarding demographics, this study was also limited in the sense that all the participants had only practiced in the North, other participants who practiced in the North and left or practiced elsewhere and moved to the North would have most likely discussed very different experiences. It is for these reasons that the results are only specific to the participants in this study, and not generalizable to the broader White female social work population in the North.

Another factor that could be considered a limitation was the absence of triangulation in this research. Triangulation is a well-known qualitative research technique where you collect data from different sources or from different researchers. However, this technique has received much criticism because it suggests that there is an objective fixed reality (Seale, 1999). Nonetheless, ways in which triangulation may have enhanced this research is to have included another method of data collection such as a focus group or survey or else to have had another researcher complete an audit of the data. Although this can be considered a limitation, it may not have changed the results of the data.

### **Conclusions of This Research**

The main conclusions resulting from the six themes that emerged from this research are: a) the social work profession is considered women's work that is ruled by men, b) women choose social work as a profession because it is "a fit" for them, personally, c) when people are members of a privileged group and an oppressed group simultaneously, it is easier to articulate the privilege that one has, d) northern life for social workers is challenging, but rewarding, as there is a strong sense of connection and congruence between personal and professional worlds, e) culture is embedded within people's lives in visible and non-visible ways, f) client's having different values is expected and helps social workers learn, g) relationship building is paramount when working with First Nations people in northern BC, and h) UNBC's School of Social Work has provided social workers with the appropriate tools to work in the North. Again, I draw attention to the fact that the conclusions that surfaced from this research are specific to the individuals who kindly participated in the research, not conclusions about

other populations

### **Future Considerations**

This research has identified several areas for future research, all focused on northern issues and connected to implications for practice and education. I will now discuss the following areas that are important for future research while linking each recommendation to practice and educational implications. Exploration is needed regarding the changing face of northern social work practice, the value of structural social work in remote northern areas, the unique experiences of female social workers in the North, and the shifting professional role of women in the North.

#### **Explore the changing face of northern social work practice**

Since the University of Northern British Columbia opened its doors in 1994 there has been a steady flow of social workers graduating from its School of Social Work. From this study's conclusion, UNBC's School of Social Work has effectively provided social workers with training to work in the North; therefore it is important to commit research funding to explore the changing face of northern social work practice. This research demonstrates that UNBC's School of Social Work has impacted the practice of northern social work in British Columbia for at least the five participants, the researcher, and hopefully the clients and organizations that we have worked with. For at least three of the participants and me, the researcher, becoming a social worker would most likely not have been considered if UNBC were not in Prince George. From this small sample it is not possible to determine the magnitude of impact that the School of Social Work has had on northern practice, but it can be justifiably hypothesized that the retention of social workers who live in the North prior to receiving their degree increases the likelihood of

them remaining in the North after graduation. This concept is an excellent topic for future research.

Although the participants in this research did not overtly reflect on northern practice issues such as isolation and lack of supervision, which are prominent in the literature, it is important to recognize that these issues are still very much a concern in northern practice, especially in northern remote practice. Perhaps this did not emerge from the data due to the fact that at the time of the interviews all the social workers were working in a non-remote, urban setting. It is possible that these issues may have emerged if the participants were working in a more isolated geographical location with a lower population density. The participants did, however, talk at length about the issues of being highly visible and the misperception that all social workers are child protection workers. On the other hand, the participants discussed positive aspects of working in the North as having a feeling of connectedness and being congruent with their personal and professional lives. The participants in this research tended to focus on the good things about northern practice.

### **More attention is needed to remote practice**

Although the participants in this research have remained in the North throughout their social work careers, and they have all worked in remote northern areas, they did not remain working in the remote areas. This area could have been explored further in this research. Schmidt (2008) suggests that the concept of remote areas can be equated “to communities that are removed from major population and service centres. It is [can be] assumed that remote communities don’t have a full range of services that people in urban centres take for granted” (p. 4). Social workers not staying in northern remote



communities to practice was not explored in this research, but northern social workers with experiences working remotely would serve as an excellent source to advise on issues related to retaining social workers in remote areas. The hope is that this advising would reduce the issues that small marginalized communities face associated with high turnover of social workers in remote northern areas. “This type of rapid turnover is costly and it hurts the community that counts on some level of stability and continuity among professional workers” (Schmidt, 2008, p. 16)

The fact that the social workers in this study were trained as structural social workers at a northern university, but did not remain working in remote northern areas warrants more attention. This should be further explored, as there could be a link between structural social work which stems from urban-based practice that focuses on systems rather than only change at the micro level. Future examination should also include whether or not northern schools of social work should foster skill enhancement in areas such as social development, as Schmidt (2000) suggests.

Even though the participants of my research did not bring up the issues of isolation, lack of supervision, lack of resources, etc. I believe it is important to make note of how, not only the presence of a school of social work in the North changes northern social work practice, but also how changes in technology are changing the face of northern social work practice. For example, Brownlee, Graham, Doucette, Hotson, and Halverson (2010) recently conducted a study that explored how technological changes impact rural and remote social work practice. The findings of this study suggest that for social workers who accessed technology including the internet, Telehealth, and Telepsychiatry there was an appearance that rural and northern practice issues have been

positively changed. The technology, according to Brownlee et al (2010) had a positive impact in practice areas such as “professional isolation, lack of ongoing training, scarcity of resources, limited professional expertise and limited access to supervision” (p. 630). The exploration of using technology in northern practice for British Columbia is another possible research project.

### **More research on northern practice is needed from women’s perspectives**

The literature consistently points to the fact that social work is different in the North than in southern areas. One of the differences is that one must incorporate all the values and standards of practice of the profession while in “a fish bowl where each and every aspect of their behaviour is observed, recorded and measured by a critical community” (Schmidt, 2000 p. 344). The literature of northern social work practice tends to assume that the social worker is an outsider most likely because of the historical tendency of social workers being from and trained in areas other than northern British Columbia. Perhaps this is because historically social workers were not trained in the North, and southern social work education did not recognize or incorporate curriculum addressing the unique needs of the North. The discourse of northern social work practice does not overtly identify that most social workers are women, as it tends to focus on social workers as being social workers without discussing the unique experiences of women. Since women’s experiences are different from men’s experiences, it is important to allow the women’s voices to be heard. This could be explored through more research that focuses on women’s unique experiences as northern social workers.

### **Explore how women’s professional status is changing in the North**

Based on the conclusion that the social work profession is considered women’s

work that is ruled by men it is recommended that further research be conducted into the changing professional status of women in the North, both within the social work field and outside the social work field. Although the data in this research revealed a sub theme that social work is dominated by men, I did not ask the participants to clarify, nor did they expand on their own views and opinions about structural and systemic changes that have hindered or enabled professional advancement of women in this field and other fields. I point this out due to several examples of women being in positions of authority. For example, the Chair of UNBC's School of Social Work is a woman and so is the Dean of the College of New Caledonia's Social Services Worker Program. Although these examples may be anecdotal, women in the North are in other positions of authority in other professional domains such as health care and politics. Examples include the Chief Executive Officer of Northern Health is a woman, as are several women holding elected leadership positions in northern BC such as band chiefs, band councillors, mayors, town councils, and one Member of the Legislative Assembly. Further research is warranted on the changing face of both leadership and social work for women in the North and elsewhere.

### **Implications for Practice and Education**

The interconnectivity of many concepts woven throughout this research has afforded me the opportunity to reflect on several areas of future research and implications for practice and education. In addition to further examination of northern practice and women's experiences with northern social work practice, other implications for practice and education include applying the concepts to northern cross-cultural practice with First Nations people that emerged from this research's data and further examination of

women's experiences as social workers

### **Cross-cultural relationship building**

The participants consistently suggested that relationship building was the hallmark to effectively working with First Nations people. This theme supports and enhances the existing literature, as the existing literature identifies theoretical expectations of working cross-culturally (McKenzie & Morrisette, 2003) and the challenges of working cross-culturally (Berman, 2006). The results of my research more closely support Sellick and Delaney's (1996) identification that northern social workers must have a continual willingness to learn. They identified four points that are important for social workers to understand contextual patterns in northern communities as being attitude of humility and 'not knowing', a willingness to listen, a willingness to be transformed, not just eagerness to transform, and an awareness that one's immersion in a northern community is inescapably a political act which leaves that community unavoidably changed (Sellick & Delaney, 1996).

The results of my research provide some first-hand accounts, or "how-to" suggestions for building effective cross-cultural relationships that include being patient and taking time, not making assumptions about clients and culture, and maintaining a stance of curiosity. These concepts could be included in social work education and transferred into practice situations for current and future social workers.

### **Women have unique experiences as social workers**

The literature consistently describes women's work as historically being undervalued and an extension of their natural responsibilities. I was also curious about whether or not the women see social work as "women's work", which they did. The

women also opened up about their views that men are in positions of power even though more women are social workers. The participants in my research concluded that because of the reality that they were the primary caregiver for their own children and there was limited access to childcare that their ability to advance within the social work profession has been restricted. In the North access to services, such as daycare, drop-in centres, etc., “constrained women's abilities to obtain resources that could support them in employment, personal situations and family relationships” (Leipert & Reutter, 2005, p 249). This conclusion is a necessary addition to social work education as it would better inform and prepare women for the multiple demands that they will encounter as social workers, in addition to the fact that their career might be limited, not only by virtue of being a woman, but also because of traditional roles of caretaking.

### **The privileged oppressed**

The participants in this research recognized that they face oppression, as women, and also recognized that all women face challenges just by being a female regardless of the privileges that they might also have in society. One participant's quote illustrates the sentiment of the participants and the researcher. She said, “I'm just like any other woman in that way it doesn't matter how tough or competent or educated I look underneath that role I'm just a woman like any other woman”.

The women were able to separate their own oppression from the work that they did even though this does not mean that they are free from oppression. Furthermore, recognizing that oppression is not easily compartmentalized and occurs for people in many ways and on many levels, the women acknowledged the additional challenges that people face when they are members of more than one oppressed group.

The women expressing that they use their privilege to assist their clients was an important recognition of how privileged groups can assist oppressed groups. The implication that this has on social work practice is for other social workers to draw on multiple tools, including themselves, to assist clients and change systems. Implications for social work education include acting as a prompt for educators and learners to examine how oppression and privilege influence and impact their own lives, and to further examine how this can help or hinder their practice. Although this research was limited in the depth of its exploration of oppression and privilege, it concludes that further research would enable a deeper understanding of the issues that members of oppressed groups face when they are also a member of a privileged group while working with other marginalized populations.

### **Structural social work “works”**

The fact that all the social workers in this research were trained from a structural school of social work and could articulate how they worked structurally is an important implication for practice and social work education. Structural social workers work at personal and system levels to instill change in the structures that oppress. Although questioning was not formulated to address how or if the participants addressed oppression at system and societal level, the emergent themes of Be Educated, Educate, and Advocate<sup>1</sup>, suggest that even though the participants have easily worked with individuals to address issues of oppression, they have also found ways to address issues at a systemic level. Women addressed “system issues” by using their privilege of position, knowledge, and influence to address oppressive structures on behalf of their clients. Education and practice implications include the fact that structural social workers

operate through creative means to meet the needs of their clients and provide immediate relief to individuals while working to address larger systemic and societal issues (Mullaly, 1993) Overall, structural social work “works” Having said that, it is important to recognize my previously stated comment that structural social work may not be the best approach in remote northern communities, as I said, this warrants further research

### **Concluding Remarks**

This research embarked on a journey to answer questions that explore the experiences of White female social workers who work with First Nations people in northern British Columbia Although I set out to explore the “two realities” of social work from the perspective of the participants, I must note the importance of recognizing the multiple “realities” of the people that the profession of social work serves From this research it is apparent, for the women who participated, that social work in the North presents as a complex group of interconnected threads that were collected from strands in the participants’ personal experiences, professional encounters, and formal training Each and every thread that the five women contributed has enabled me to “weave” and create a tapestry that reflects the impressive collective experiences that the women kindly shared The participants in this research demonstrated that being both a member of a privileged group and a member of an oppressed group of people is embedded in their day-to-day personal and professional lives As indicated by the conclusions and recommendations, this research has left me with many more questions than answers

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## Appendix 1 Participant Information Sheet

### Two Realities of Social Work Privilege and Oppression PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

**Researcher** Mary-Ann Johnson, Master of Social Work Student  
c/o Glen Schmidt, Social Work Professor  
UNBC School of Social Work,  
3333 University Way, Prince George, BC V2N 4Z9  
Phone 250-960-6519  
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**Supervisor** Glen Schmidt, Social Work Professor  
UNBC School of Social Work,  
3333 University Way, Prince George, BC V2N 4Z9  
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e-mail [schmidt@unbc.ca](mailto:schmidt@unbc.ca)

**Thesis Title**  
Two Realities of Social Work Privilege and Oppression

**Purpose** The purpose of this qualitative research project is to describe the experiences of White female social workers who work with First Nations people in northern British Columbia

**How Respondents Were Chosen** You were asked to participate in this research study because you are a White female social worker working with First Nations people in northern British Columbia

**Role of Participants** Your role as a research participant is to complete a one on one, semi-structured, recorded interview with the researcher, who will also take written notes. You will be asked to answer questions and provide information based on your own beliefs and experiences. This will take about sixty to ninety minutes of your time. After the interview, the recorded interviews will be transcribed into text without any identifying information. A paid transcriptionist may be used to help transcribe the recordings.

Transcripts of your interview will be made available to you for feedback in order to verify the accuracy.

**Risks and Benefits** There are no known risks associated with participating in this study.

The benefits include increased awareness and information about the experiences of



White female social workers working with First Nations people in Northern British Columbia. This knowledge may assist social workers, social work theorists, educators, and practitioners, as well as northern communities in understanding how culture and gender influence practice in the North.

### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

Your anonymity and confidentiality will be protected. The researcher will not disclose the identity of the research participants. The identifying information on the consent forms will remain confidential and be protected by being stored separately from the interviews and the transcripts in a locked cabinet. Identifying information will not be used in the transcripts, analysis, or final report. Quotations in the final report will not contain any identifying information and pseudonyms will be used instead of actual names.

**Voluntary participation** Participation in this project is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. If you choose to withdraw your information will be destroyed.

**Getting a copy of the thesis** A copy of the thesis and individual transcripts will be made available to each participant.

**Data storage** The researcher will store the interview tapes, notes, transcriptions, and consent forms in a locked cabinet. Consent forms will be kept in a separate location from the transcripts and notes. All documents related to the research will be retained for five years after the study has been completed. At that time all paper documents will be shredded and the audio files will be deleted.

**How to get in touch** If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact the researcher or her supervisor at the numbers provided above. If you have any concerns about the study, please contact the Office of Research and Graduate Studies at the University of Northern British Columbia (250) 960-5820.

## Appendix 2 Informed Consent

### Two Realities of Social Work Privilege and Oppression INFORMED CONSENT

Please circle yes or no indicating your response to the following questions

Do you understand that that you have been asked to be in a research study?	Yes	No
Have you read and received a copy of the attached information sheet?	Yes	No
Do you understand that the research interview will be recorded?	Yes	No
Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in participating in this study?	Yes	No
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	Yes	No
Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time? You do not have to give a reason for doing so	Yes	No
Have the issues of confidentiality and anonymity been explained to you?	Yes	No
Do you understand that you will have access to the information you provide?	Yes	No

This study was explained to me by \_\_\_\_\_  
Name

My signature indicates that I agree to participate in this study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I believe that the person signing this form understands what is involved in the study and voluntarily agrees to participate

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

A copy of this consent is to be provided to both the participant and the researcher

### Appendix 3 Transcriptionist Oath of Confidentiality

#### Two Realities of Social Work Privilege and Oppression TRANSCRIPTIONIST OATH OF CONFIDENTIALITY

As a professional transcriptionist hired to transcribe interviews for the MSW thesis Research project, *Two Realities of Social Work Privilege and Oppression*, I understand that I must treat all information, learned through transcribing the interviews of research participants, as confidential

I further understand and agree that this Oath of Confidentiality will continue indefinitely

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness

Project contact information

Mary-Ann Johnson, MSW Student [johnsom2@unbc.ca](mailto:johnsom2@unbc.ca) 250-960-6519

Glen Schmidt, Thesis Supervisor [schmidt@unbc.ca](mailto:schmidt@unbc.ca) 250- 960-6519

Note A copy of this Oath of Confidentiality will be given to the transcriptionist

## **Appendix 4 Interview Protocol**

### **Two Realities of Social Work Privilege and Oppression INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS**

**I would like to start by getting to know who you are, the professional experience you have, and where you work**

- What is your current professional role?
- How long have you worked in your current role?
- How long have you worked in the social work field?
- How long have you lived in Northern BC?
- What is the size of the community where you work?
- How long have you worked with First Nations people?
- How old are you?
- What is your marital status?
- Where did you go to school?
- What degree(s) did you receive?

**Now, I am going to focus on your professional role as a social worker**

- What is it like working in a profession that has mostly women working in it?
- How are you valued as a social worker?
- What are the reasons that you do the work that you do?
- Who do you turn to for professional support and guidance?
- How do you deal with work-related problems?
- How do you balance your professional and personal life?

**I would like to discuss your thoughts about being a woman in northern B C**

- What is it like living and working in northern B C?
- Do you view yourself as being an oppressed individual?
  - If so, in what ways are you oppressed?
  - If not, what makes you think that you are not oppressed?
- How do you see your own personal problems as they connect to the bigger picture (society)?
- How do you find personal empowerment?

**I am interested in your experiences of working with First Nations people**

- What were your experiences with First Nations people prior to commencing this work?
- What does culture mean to you?
- What is the significance of culture in the work you do?
- How do you address cultural differences in your relationships with clients?
- How does being White influence your work?

- In what ways are you a person of privilege?
- How does being privileged influence your work?
- What is it like for you when your clients have different values than your own?
- How do you assist with empowering individuals that you work with?
- How do you encourage your clients to see how their personal problems connect to the bigger picture (society)?

**Appendix 5 Research Ethics Approval****UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA****RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD**

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**MEMORANDUM**

**To** Mary-Ann Johnson  
**CC** Glen Schmidt

**From** Henry Harder, Chair  
Research Ethics Board

**Date** February 4, 2009

**Re** **E2009 0120 013**  
Two Realities of Social Workers Privilege and Oppression

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Thank you for submitting the above-noted request for a project review to the Research Ethics Board. Your proposal has been approved.

We are pleased to issue approval for the above named study for a period of 12 months from the date of this letter. Continuation beyond that date will require further review and renewal of REB approval. Any changes or amendments to the protocol or consent form must be approved by the Research Ethics Board.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Henry Harder